

MCKENNEDY, BRENDAN S., M.F.A. *After the Funeral, and Other Stories*. (2013)  
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 108 pp.

The four stories in this collection examine the effects on the individual of abandonment and dissolution of the family. The central effect of abandonment shared by all these characters is deep-seated anxiety. Some of these characters are more aware than others of the ways their anxieties operate in their lives and affect their decisions, but each of these characters seeks to control or to escape the anxiety—some by playing music, some through sex, some through drugs, prescribed or illegal, and some by breaking into strangers' homes or hotel rooms. In every case, the character's inability to deal with the underlying psychological causes of their anxiety sets the character up for another instance of abandonment, and further suffering. Only in the final story, "After the Funeral," does the protagonist seem finally to recognize the source of her suffering—but the character has already, in her denial, come into such a degree of danger that her triumph is ambiguous, and possibly pyrrhic.

AFTER THE FUNERAL, AND OTHER STORIES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2013

Approved by

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## THE BIRTHDAY SUITE

Until her father died, Sissy Willard's parents took her and her two brothers out of school every year at the end of April to spend a week in Kitty Hawk, and every year they stayed in the same old beachfront high-rise, the Ocean Vista. Every year they rented the same suite, 509. In every room hung paintings of lighthouses and old-timey airplanes viewed from below. The ceilings were stained, and although it had been years since smoking was allowed inside the hotel, every room smelled like old cigarettes, just like all the rooms of their house in Chester, South Carolina, and all their clothes always smelled like old cigarettes.

The year she was fifteen Sissy decided that the ocean in April was too cold to swim in, and she sat on the lumpy blanket under the parasol and listened to her mother saw away at her father. Where did he want to go to dinner? Had he heard anything yet about the county HVAC contract? Was he upset about something? And it seemed to Sissy strange, but typical, that they'd sit here with their backs to the world, watching the water like they were waiting for something to come out of it, or for it to change somehow, when it hadn't changed for millions of years. Her little brothers, the twins Randall and Jeff, frolicked together in the choppy gray waves. They were the only swimmers, the only life you could see in the whole noisy mess. Once, when she was a little girl here, she had asked her mother what was on the other side, and her mother had told her, "If I had to

guess, I'd say France," and Sissy thought about it: *France*. She imagined a place so lively and strange that it seemed unlikely it could be out there, directly in front of them.

"Skip, what's bothering you?" said her mother.

Sissy looked at him, sunk in his beach chair, hooded in smoke. He looked out ahead so far that if anyone could see what was on the other side, he could. He winced when her mother pecked at him, and Sissy got why. Sometimes her mother's voice was like a snore you'd been listening to all night; just the sound of it made you grind your teeth. And he hated coming here. Being trapped in the car and the hotel and the crummy restaurant booths with four other people, throwing away a year's savings on a week of lost work. Some of these things Sissy had heard him say, and some things you could just feel, in his silence and in that long gaze. It annoyed her that her mother was blind to it.

She went back up to the suite alone. She stood in the bathtub and washed the sand from between her toes. She tried to read, and then she watched TV for a while, but she couldn't sit still. She felt like a bumper car stuck in a corner. So she went out again. She went to the elevator, and rode it to the top, the ninth floor, and came out onto the breezy walkway that looked out across the parking lot and the shops and restaurants along the beach road, which even in the off-season trembled with cars, their roofs flashing in the sun.

But the walkway was quiet, like the halls at school when everyone was in class. She hardly ever saw any other guests here. She put her old-fashioned metal room key into the first door she came to, just to see. It scraped into the slot, but of course the deadbolt

wouldn't turn. She moved on to the next door, and idly twisted the doorknob, and she gave a little gasp as like a present unwrapping itself the door fell open.

She peered into the entryway. The air in there was like a held breath. She poked her head in, and the smell of a baking cake surprised her. It seemed to invite her. She bowed in farther. Nothing was moving. Her heart seemed huge in her chest. She set one foot onto the carpet, and when no one leaped out to grab her by the neck as she was half expecting, she brought her other foot inside. On the wall hung a painting of a pelican standing on a post in front of the blue ocean, its black pebble eye fixed on Sissy like it knew more about her than she knew about herself.

She had never imagined that other suites might be different from her family's. This had only one bedroom, off the entryway, and in the kitchenette the refrigerator was half-sized, like for a midget. In the corner of the living area a suitcase lay open, empty, the clothes sprawled in colorful confusion all over the pullout bed, bathing suits and dresses and shirts and underwear, men's and women's all tousled up together. On the table sat the cake, yellow with chocolate icing, lopsided like a Dr. Seuss hat. The candles had melted down in puddles bright blue and yellow, and someone had tried to write *Happy Birthday* with green icing, the letters jumbled and giddy. The cake had been eaten right out of its pan with pink plastic spoons, which lay around it, alongside beer cans and red cups that breathed out the dizzy smell of liquor.

Inside the refrigerator she discovered a section of sausage pizza and four cans of beer. She took a can from its ring, and sat down, and cracked it open. The aluminum vibrated in her palm. She took a gulp. Its coldness spread across her chest. It seemed to

slow up everything in her that usually buzzed and jittered. She felt like if the people walked in right now, they would know her. She pinched some cake into her mouth. It was stale, and its faded sweetness on her tongue made her feel like she had put inside her some memory of the party that she'd missed in here. They gathered around her where she stood. They were older than she was but not as old as her parents. They were laughing as they sang.

She drank the rest of the beer and left the empty can on the table, beside the empties that had been there before her.

The next year at school she was a sophomore, and in her theatre class she wrote a play. It was about an old man, a bitter crotchety guy named Filbert, who one day discovers that everyone he speaks to believes everything he tells them. He invents for himself a life history full of adventure and honorable deeds, and by the end everyone around him believes he's a hero, and expects him to behave heroically. She titled it *THE GOOD LIAR: A play in one act by Cecilia Willard*. Her teacher suggested she send the play off to a student contest in Los Angeles, so she did. And each day when she got off the bus, she pulled the mail from the box and flipped through the bills and circulars. But months went by, and one day she forgot to check, and soon after that she stopped expecting to find out anything.

When her family returned in April to Kitty Hawk, she didn't go down to the beach at all, but right away began to wander the walkways on every floor of the hotel, trying each knob, finding and entering all the Ocean Vista's unlocked suites. Every door that



fell open to her released across her body a deep, dizzying flush. She riffled around in suitcases, pressed dirty clothes to her face and breathed in their strange smells, and probed with her finger inside little amber medication bottles. She picked up earrings and cell phone chargers and bottle openers, but in her pockets the keepsakes seemed crude and useless, so instead she took from refrigerators cold drinks and hard-boiled eggs and cookie dough, and although her family, as always, had brought with them tons of Coca-Cola and corn chips and frozen pizzas, standing in the middle of these rooms she ate and drank like a starved orphan. And then, calmed to near sleepiness, filled with all the sensations and possibilities the world had to offer her, she'd stroll out, and let the door sigh shut against her back.

She made herself wait until the end of the week before she rode to the top. And when the elevator doors opened to the ninth floor, they were like stage curtains. She tried the first suite, and the door didn't budge, like she knew it wouldn't, and she went on to the door of the birthday suite. It was red with gold numbers: 913. In the peephole burned a tiny light, still as a star. The sound of the ocean grew loud in her ears, and a thin queasiness turned in her belly. She put her hand on the knob and it seemed to vibrate in her palm. She gave it a gentle twist, and pressed with her other hand against the door. But it wouldn't open. And disappointment and relief both flooded into the space inside her that for a year had held the prickly tinsel knot of waiting.

One night in September, her mother tapped on Sissy's door, and then came in and sat down on the bed, and halfway into a deep breath she began to cry. Sissy, sitting up

against her headboard with homework in her lap, froze, as if a bear had come into the room.

“Daddy’s sick,” said her mother. She grabbed on to Sissy’s ankle, and went on crying. “What are we going to do?”

It was lung cancer, and it was aggressive. Her father himself never said a word. He started chemotherapy, and for a few months life in their house went on like before, just a little more gingerly. But then he got too sick to work, and things began to unravel around Sissy, in jolts and flashes, as if she were rolling down a steep rocky hill. Her father’s employees quit, and the work van was repossessed, and then the house, and then Sissy and her family moved up to Charlotte, into an apartment, and she started a new school, and then her mother was working as a kindergarten teaching assistant, and the twins were working weekends together at a car wash, and Sissy most days after school was working in a coffee shop. She did not keep any of the money she made. When she came home at night, her hair full of the sour smell of the French roast, everyone had gone to their rooms except her father. She’d find him limp in his armchair in front of the TV, alternating drags on his Winston with drags on his oxygen mask. “Hey, Daddy,” she’d say. And he’d turn his head so she could see his bony profile, his eyes watery and gray, his skin like old newspaper. And then she’d say, “Well, good-night.”

She was changing. Something bitter and dense was growing inside her. She was tired all the time, and her stomach hurt so badly she couldn’t eat. Her grades began to sink. She was snippy with customers and coworkers and teachers. Although her new classmates seemed to not even see her, sometimes at school she would lock herself in a

bathroom stall for a whole period, just to have the quiet hour alone. And sometimes, lying in bed, she was overtaken by the feverish worry that she was getting sick too.

At night, her mother came into her room and asked questions about the budget, or about repairing the van, or about presents for the twins' birthday. And then she'd say, "I wish he would open up to me, Sissy. I just never can tell what's going on in there." Her mother's crying was different now, awful in its restraint, like the visible part of it was only the slightest corner. She wanted to be hugged and reassured, but Sissy couldn't provide her these things any more than she could fill the checking account with a million dollars.

The weeks wore through to the year's end, and her father got sicker instead of better. In January her mother said, "He doesn't have but eight more months, if even that." And then—right after that—she began to talk about saving for Kitty Hawk. "Mama," said Sissy, "we can't afford that. Not this year." And her mother said, "Baby, this year is all there's going to be. With Daddy, or maybe ever again." And for the next several weeks, with every shot of espresso she pulled and with every square of tile she mopped, Sissy imagined the sad little fried seafood dinner for which all her work and sacrifice was destined to pay.

In February, she opened the mailbox to gather the bills and found a letter addressed to her, Cecilia Willard, from Sunset Playwrights. The letter was dated a week before, and signed by someone named Paul Brody, who told Sissy he had loved her play, *The Good Liar*, and he would like to pay for her to come out to California in July to attend a month-long playwriting camp. She sat in her room for an hour as the sunlight

drained out of the day. The letter felt in her hands like something she had picked up in someone else's suite at the Ocean Vista. She tried to remember writing the play. Where she had sat in her old bedroom to work. She tried to see the arrangement of her furniture, much of which was now gone. The wallpaper, the windows—the whole memory was dim and broken. She put the letter away in a drawer, beneath her underwear, and a week later checked to see if it was still there, and if it said the same thing. A month in July, it said. It was like a fucking joke. She tore the letter in half, and then tore those pieces in half, and stuffed the whole mess into the kitchen garbage.

When the last week of April came, Sissy and not her father drove the SUV to Kitty Hawk. The twins sat in the middle row, playing video games in their laps, cheerful and clueless. Her father stretched out with his oxygen and his Winstons in the rearmost seat. And in the passenger seat beside Sissy her mother chirped and chattered, read aloud billboards and church signs, and when they had passed through Raleigh and Sissy had not all morning said one word, her mother said, “What’s gotten into you?” And when Sissy didn’t respond, or even for a second take her eyes off the road, her mother put up the same bruised silence with which she had always responded to the silence of Sissy’s father.

The stucco outer walls of the Ocean Vista seemed dingier than she remembered. She dawdled while her family lugged their things into the hotel ahead of her, and when she came dragging her suitcase into the lobby, the first thing she saw—the only thing she saw—was the desk attendant. Sissy had never seen her before. She was older than Sissy by a few years, one of those beach girls, with hair of many shades, browns and blonds

and reds, and a tan so deep it was kind of profound. She wore a little golden ring in her nostril, and on a beaded strand close at her throat hung a yin-yang pendant. Her eyes were blue, and when she looked up, Sissy's face grew warm and she became aware of her own oversized T-shirt, her jeans and clunky sneakers. It wouldn't have surprised her to find out this girl wore a bikini beneath her clothes at all times. Her nametag read LUCINDA. She gave Sissy's mother the receipts to sign, and slid across the counter the old-fashioned metal room keys, each chained to a yellow foam float like a small banana. "Fifth floor," she said, like this was the family's first stay here. "Elevator's right behind you." With her cottony voice and her tangled hair, she seemed like they'd roused her out of bed. Her clueless helpfulness charmed Sissy.

Lucinda turned her attention to a television behind the counter, and Sissy went after her family to the elevator. She could not pull her eyes from Lucinda until the doors closed between them.

When she got up to the suite, she went straight out to the balcony and shut the glass door. The beach was vacant, stitched up with tall grass and fences, and the water stretched away forever, gray and choppy. Everything was just like it always was, like it had always been. She felt as small as a moth. And after a moment a strange desperation crept up on her, as it always did when she came to the ocean after a long time away—the feeling that the constant commotion of the surf, the waves' endless tumbling in and sucking away, anxious and careless, might drive her crazy. But then, after only a few moments, the tension faded, and all the noise slid backward into a kind of gray nothingness, and only a wave's thunder now and then louder than the others would call

her attention back to that monotonous mess, and then again it would fade away. The door skidded open behind her. She didn't turn. It slid shut again, and she heard the clink and the strike of her father's Zippo lighter, and the first sweet puff of his cigarette drifted in front of her. She breathed it in through her nose and held it inside her. It burned her nostrils and raised tears in her eyes, and she set all the muscles of her face to keep the tears from falling. And behind her, draw by draw the cigarette burned down to its filter, and each breath of smoke that her father had held in his own wasted lungs passed her face on its way out to the sea and the sky, and she inhaled it, and held it in her, each breath increasingly acrid, and the tears finally slipped away from her control and crept down to her chin. She should say something. She would regret having said nothing—she knew she would one day look back and hate herself. But she'd always been afraid to talk to him. Even her hellos always seemed always to exasperate him, an intrusion on his space and his silence, and it hurt her to see that she had annoyed him. And if she turned around right now and said, I'm scared, Daddy. Please tell me what's going to happen, and what I'll do when you're gone, how we'll get by, and how I can help Mama without killing her, how you did it for so long—if she even just turned around and said, I'm going to miss you, Daddy, and he gave her that same look of irritation, it would tear her in two. So she said nothing. And finally, but sooner than she expected, came the soft grinding of the cigarette butt against the ashtray. The door slid open and closed behind her, and she was alone again with the waves.

Everyone else went out to dinner, but she stayed behind. She told her mother her stomach hurt, the first words she'd spoken all day. And when they were gone, she went

inside and took the spare room key from the table. In the elevator she stared at the buttons. The thought of breaking into someone's room just to poke around in their dirty clothes made her tired. She rode instead down to the lobby. At the desk, Lucinda sat on a stool so high that the torn knees of her bluejeans were visible above the counter: the sight of her gave Sissy a jolt of adrenaline. Her television murmured sitcom laughter, bland and rhythmic. She glanced up at Sissy and then returned to her program. At the rack full of tourist brochures, Sissy lifted from their slots flyers advertising amusement parks and museums and golf courses. She opened a brochure and without looking at Lucinda said, "You ever been hang gliding?"

"Nope," said Lucinda.

"What about this?" said Sissy. "Helicopter tour of Seventeenth Century shipwreck sites."

"I'm scared of heights," said Lucinda. "Most of that stuff is closed till next month."

Sissy put her hands into her back pockets and walked on her toes toward the desk. She asked Lucinda if she lived here all year long. Every time Lucinda spoke, she first pointed her eyes upward, like she was listening for some voice to tell her what to say. She said she had an apartment. Sissy asked how much it cost. "Five-fifty," said Lucinda. "But it's furnished. Plus utilities are included."

"In Charlotte," said Sissy, "we pay ten-fifty for a three-bedroom. It's highway robbery."

"It's not so bad if you can split the rent," said Lucinda.

“True,” said Sissy.

“My boyfriend is supposed to pay half. In theory.”

“That’s a pretty bracelet.” Sissy touched it, and then put her hand back into her pocket. The bracelet was a broad band of glass beads, green and yellow. Her fingertip tingled.

“My friend Candy makes them on a bead loom,” said Lucinda, and turned up her wrist to show the copper clasp, tiny, delicate, the skin beneath it soft and creamy. “She’s a serious artist. Candy Sinclair. She has a shop in Duck.” Sissy asked what else she was afraid of, besides heights. Lucinda looked upward for a long moment. Her eyelids were dark and sleepy-looking. “Gators, I guess,” she said. “I never seen one except at the zoo, but supposedly we get them here. I think about them whenever I’m in parking lots.”

“I don’t like snakes,” said Sissy. “I’ve never seen a gator.”

“Horses scare me sometimes,” said Lucinda.

“You’re not scared of horses,” said Sissy. “Come on.”

“Them wild horses? Up in Corolla? Me and Scott used to go up there, up past the houses? We’d lay up on the dunes and drink. But I could never just relax and enjoy it, I was so scared those damn horses were going to jump up over the dunes and trample us to death.” She laughed, and her laugh was raspy and deep. Her arms were so tanned and her eyes were the blue-green of a swimming pool’s deep end lit up at night. All her depths seemed visible to Sissy.



Sissy said, "Sometimes when I'm lying in bed at night, I convince myself I've got about twelve different kinds of cancer. I can't even go to sleep. I just want to crawl out of my skin."

Lucinda said, "I saw your dad's oxygen tank."

"Yeah," said Sissy.

"My aunt had emphysema, till she died. I thought that's what he might have."

"Lung cancer," said Sissy. She was pleased that Lucinda had noticed her, but her pleasure mixed up with a queasy kind of guilt, and also anxiety that Lucinda might think she was fishing for pity. "He brought it on himself," she said. She had never thought this before, at least not in these words. "He smokes three packs a day."

"I mean, I smoke," said Lucinda. "But I wouldn't say I'm trying to give myself cancer."

"True," said Sissy. Her face grew hot. She wasn't sure what she thought. She said, "What's it like to live at the beach?"

"I guess it's like living anywhere," said Lucinda. "It's not that different from Greenville. I just get up and go to work, and then I go home and make dinner and smoke up and watch movies. I don't usually get to pick the movie, but even that I don't fight with him about it anymore."

"It sounds nice," said Sissy.

"I used to be more scared of anything that I'd never get out of Greenville. That's all I wanted to do, every minute. I'd pray to God, just get me out of Greenville."

"And you did it," said Sissy. "You made it."

“Yeah, I guess,” said Lucinda, and went back to her television program.

The next afternoon Sissy’s family went down to the beach, and she watched from the balcony as they claimed a spot of sand and set up the yellow parasol and their blankets and chairs. Her father collapsed into his seat like a cluster of tent poles. Her mother slipped off her yellow beach robe, and underneath she had on her black one-piece. She’d always been a larger woman, but she’d put on a lot more just in the last year, and it was difficult now to look at her, in that same sad bathing suit, with its ruffled skirt that didn’t hide her waistline like it was meant to, but instead seemed to make fun of it. When she sat down in her chair, Sissy was glad not to have to look at her anymore. She watched them watch the ocean. She knew now that Morocco, and not France, lay straight across. The idea of it—*Morocco*—made her anxious, somehow. She couldn’t even imagine the place. But she could kind of see, now, why someone would want to sit down there, on the beach, and stare out across the water. How it could maybe be comforting, to look at something so big and undeniable that hadn’t changed in millions of years. How even when you had to go home, it could comfort you to think that the ocean would still be there whenever you came back. That next year, or fifty years from now, at least one fucking thing in the world would still be the same.

The twins dropped their things on the sand and ran splashing into the waves. At thirteen they were still too doozy to care that the water was cold. She’d always been a little jealous of them. They’d always have each other in a way she’d never be close to anyone. But even for them, the day would come when one would die before the other—it took her breath away to think it. It made her dizzy. She went inside, and just stood there

in the middle of the room and breathed, until her vision cleared, and the sound of the ocean had faded again behind her.

She took the key from the kitchen counter and left the suite. She thought of Lucinda and her little life here at the beach. Whatever Lucinda thought of it, it was a better life than anything in front of Sissy. She felt in it an echo the possibilities that used to seem to wait behind every door here. She went to the elevator. She rode the elevator, rattling around her like a cage about to come apart, to the ninth floor. She went to the first door, 914. She put her key into the lock, and turned it, and it did not open. She went on to room 913. Now that she stood before it, she felt its pull again. Its red door. Its gold numbers. The steady star in its peephole. The sound of the ocean like something heavy swinging above her head. The cool copper doorknob in her palm: she twisted it, tenderly. She pressed the door. It opened to her.

For many months she had imagined a particular scene. She would enter the birthday suite. Again she would find the cake, and the beer, and the pizza. And again she would take the beer from the fridge, and sit down alone and drink it. And then the people whose room it was would return, and she would have in common with them that first time she had come here, when she had seen the remains of their party. It was a story she could tell them, and charm them, make them laugh, and they would let her stay.

It was a childish fantasy, and she didn't really believe it would come true, but to imagine it had made her happy.

Now when she came into the entryway, the first thing she looked for, the pelican on the old wooden post, its tiny knowing eye, she did not find. It had been replaced by a pastel painting of a lighthouse with red stripes. The air in the suite hung ripe with the smell of beer and dirty clothes. In the living area she drew back the vertical blinds from the glass door to get some light into the room. And when she turned to face the mess in the suite, for an instant she was confused—because just as she'd begun to accept, truly, how silly it had been for her to dream that she would ever find here the same people whose cake and beer she had tasted, she found again the pullout bed strewn with clothes, and again she saw the empty cans and cups and scabby paper plates crowding the little table. She looked into the refrigerator, and there lay a pizza—beef and onions this time—and although it was Pabst instead of Budweiser, and bottles instead of cans, there on the shelf waited three beers in a carton.

She took one and opened it. She swallowed a large sip. It was foamy and sour, but it went down smoothly, and she sipped again. She went to the bed and with her finger and thumb lifted a rumpled pair of boxer shorts, light blue with red pinstripes, and she turned them in front of her face, and then dropped them, and picked up an undershirt and, after hesitating only a moment, pressed it against her face and breathed in its tang of cigarette smoke and a faint musk—the smell, she understood, of a man's body. And just as she saw that all the clothes scattered around her were men's clothes, the door of the suite opened and then slammed shut.

She tossed the shirt away from her. And she turned from the bed, quickly enough to realize that she was already half drunk. The two young men who had entered saw her,

and froze. One was lanky, with a beard and long brown hair from which hung, over his shoulder, a black and white feather. The other, in front, carried by its handle a guitar case, and in his other hand a crumpled Hardee's bag. He was stocky, with jet-black hair that fell across his eyeglasses. He stared at Sissy. The glasses made his eyes seem huge and unblinking. He turned to look behind him at the one with the long hair and the feather, who made a face as if to say, "Don't ask *me*." Then the one with the glasses turned back to Sissy, and bent at the knees to set down his guitar case, and said, "All right. I'll go first. Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm sorry," said Sissy. "I'm in the wrong room."

"Well, that depends on a couple of things."

"No, this is definitely the wrong room," she said. "But the door was unlocked, and I guess I was confused."

"But you went ahead and made yourself at home." The one with the glasses pointed at the beer in her hand, and then turned his palm up. "So? What the fuck." The one with the feather passed behind him. He knelt and began to load beer into the fridge. He said, "Are you hungry?" And when she didn't answer, he turned to look at her. "There's pizza," he said.

"No, not really," said Sissy.

The one with the glasses turned a chair to face her, and sat and opened the guitar case at his feet. "So are you a burglar? You don't look like a meth addict. Are you some kind of beach bum? Do they have those this far north?"

"No, I told you. I'm staying in this hotel. I'm just in the wrong—"

“Well I don’t believe you,” he said, and cocked his head, as if daring her to disagree. From the bag he dropped into his hand a sandwich, which he unwrapped and began to eat. His sleeves were rolled into tight cuffs, and inside his forearm was tattooed some kind of geometric design.

“I’m a playwright,” she said.

The one with the glasses snorted, but the one with the beard and the feather said, “Seriously?”

“I just like to look around. I like to see what other people have in their rooms. To get ideas, for dramatic situations.”

“Well then, nicely done,” said the one with the glasses. “I think we have ourselves one of those.”

“You want a beer?” said the one with the feather.

“She’s fucking got one already,” said the one with the glasses. And then his face softened a little, and he said, “It’s fine. Drink it. It’s already open.” And when Sissy didn’t move, he scowled again and said, “Well don’t fucking waste it. If you don’t want it, hand it here.” She stepped toward him. She tried to hold with the muscles of her face, like a slipping mask, an attitude of fearlessness, even nihilism. She held out the bottle. He said, “Drink it. It’s yours now.”

Standing closer to them, she felt, strangely, less uncomfortable. She sipped from the beer. It was thicker, warmer now and yeasty on her tongue. The one with the feather stood up tall and thin. He opened a bottle and said, “I’m Peter.”

“I’m Cecilia,” she said.

“That’s Vaughn,” said Peter. “He’s in a shit-ass mood because we’re out of money, and he can’t get anyone around here to pay us to play.”

“What kind of music do you guys do?”

“Musicians hate that question,” said Vaughn. “You know the Flat Duo Jets? Dex Romweber?” When Sissy shook her head, Peter said, “The Violent Femmes. You know them.” And when she shook her head again, Vaughn said, “Well, Taylor Swift, right? Yeah, we sound just like her.”

“I should go,” said Sissy. “Thank you for the beer.”

“Where are you from?” said Peter. He sat down. They both faced her in their chairs, as though considering her at an audition. She said she was from Charlotte, and Vaughn said, “What kind of plays do you write?”

“Playwrights hate that question,” she said.

“Yes, correct, but then you give points of reference anyway,” said Vaughn.

“Because you want people to admire you for your influences. You say Mamet. Sam Shepard. August Wilson.”

“Are you in theatre?” said Sissy, and she caught her mask as it slipped, caught the pitch of her voice rising.

“Have you ever actually produced anything?” said Vaughn.

“I won a national contest,” she said.

“I thought Charlotte was more a wrestling and racing kind of town.”

“It has a very vibrant theatre community,” she said. “Where are you guys from?”

“My brother’s a stage actor,” said Vaughn, “in case you’re impressed by coincidences. It’s true, though. Right, Peter? He’s up in New York.”

“New *York*,” said Sissy. She tried to tune her inflection to come across as impressed, but not naïve, and certainly not awestruck.

“Yeah, it’s got a very vibrant theatre community,” said Vaughn. “Actually, he’s a graphic designer more of the time than he’s an actor.” He took a small bite of his sandwich and said, “He’s in an off-Broadway company. Or off-*off*-Broadway, I guess is what they say.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose, and the unguardedness of the gesture relaxed her a little more. He said, “It’s some queer theater. They actually just won some queer theater award. It’s a whole big queer deal. If you’re going to linger, you might as well sit down.” With the sole of his boot he pushed out the one empty chair. Sissy perched on its edge. Vaughn said, “What are you, twelve? Am I going to jail for letting you steal my beer?”

“I’m nineteen,” she said. “I won’t tell. What’s your band called?”

“Peter and Vaughn,” said Vaughn.

Peter wiggled his fingers in the air in front of him and said, “It came to him in a dream.”

“That’s a stage bit,” said Vaughn. “Pete plays the drums, so he entertains the crowd while I’m tuning up.” He lifted from its case his acoustic guitar and held it by the neck. “You lose their attention for ten seconds, and you have to win them all over again.”

“That’s a pretty guitar,” said Sissy. “Are you going to play me something?”

“No,” said Vaughn, and laid the instrument flat across his lap as if to spank it.



Peter leaned his chair back and with one hand opened the fridge, and when he leaned forward again, he offered Sissy a beer. She took it. He said, “I have a dramatic situation for you.”

“All right,” she said, and drank a long gulp. The fresh beer tingled in her mouth. She thought of the word *effervescent*, and laughed a little to herself.

“So last week we were at this Shoney’s down in Myrtle. We’re at the breakfast bar, and there’s this whole fucking group made up entirely, I do not kid, of one-armed people. I mean, old people and little kids and black people and white people and Chinese people—this international one-armed brigade, all lined up to get their French toast sticks.”

“They weren’t even all one-armed on the same side,” said Vaughn. “It was chaos.”

“But they were making their way,” said Peter. “They had found each other in the world, and they all went to the breakfast bar together. That’s a play with a happy ending.”

“It might be hard to find twenty one-armed actors,” said Sissy.

“There are ways to fake it,” said Vaughn. “They can do all kinds of shit in the theater these days.”

“Fuck,” said Peter. “Now I want pancakes.”

“I can make pancakes,” said Sissy. “I can make all kinds of breakfast. French toast. Waffles.”

“Stop it,” said Peter. “You’re killing me.”

She laughed and nearly fell out of her chair, for the world was now weighted to her right, like a car taking a long curve too quickly. Vaughn held in his hand a small canteen—yes, it was, a Boy Scout canteen, which made Sissy laugh again—and from it he poured liquor into a red cup. He said, “Well this is almost a party. You know who we should get up here? That God-damn girl that works downstairs. She’s kind of a bitch, but God damn, she’s cute.”

“Lucinda,” said Sissy, and the name glowed on her tongue. “*Lucinda*. I know her. She has a boyfriend.”

“Well I don’t want to buy a house in the suburbs with her,” said Vaughn. “I just want her to get drunk with us.”

“She likes to get high,” said Sissy. “I do know that about her.” She drank and said, “Do you want me to go see if she’ll come up?”

“Aw, don’t leave,” said Peter. But Vaughn lifted and turned his cup in front of his glasses, like a goblet, like a stage prop, and said, “Cecilia, if you get that girl to come up here, so help me Jesus I will take your play to New York myself and put it directly into the hands ... of someone in New York. A producer. I don’t know. We’ll ask my brother.”

Sissy was on her feet, and the floor tilted beneath her, and she grabbed the table to steady herself. Peter said, “Whoah there, sailor,” and she saluted him, and stepped slowly, carefully, toward the door. Out on the walkway, the sun, half-sunk behind the dunes, blinded her, golden brilliant and she gripped the railing and the parking lot checkered with car roofs colorful as gumballs accordioned away from her. She sucked in a deep breath, and the air was clean and fresh inside her. She glided to the elevator. Its

doors shut her in with their gentle bumping sound, and she shut her eyes, and the deep darkness spun sideways, as if she were on the inside of a rolling globe, and she sank back against the railing. She would never have this day again. She would never again see the birthday suite. And next year another family would take her suite, her family's suite, 509, or maybe it would just sit empty. She opened her eyes. And with the flat of her thumb she mashed the button for the lobby, and the car lurched beneath her.

She found Lucinda slouched on her stool, head propped in one hand, those swimming-pool eyes narrowing as Sissy approached. "Lucinda," she said, and the word like chocolate icing melted in her mouth. "Lucinda, Lucinda. Even your name." Tears stung her eyes, which was ridiculous, and she laughed a little, and she couldn't see Lucinda through the tears, which kept coming. "There's these guys upstairs," she said. "And we all want you to come up and have some drinks with us." She cupped her hand beside her mouth and whispered, "I'm pretty sure they'll get you high."

"Jesus, honey," said Lucinda. "Are you OK?"

"We all just want you to come up," said Sissy, and dragged the back of her hand across her eyes. "I want you to come. Please come up."

"Honey, I'm working," said Lucinda, and the way she kept calling her *honey* made Lucinda seem much older, and very loving, and it made Sissy feel very young and small and safe and cared for, as if none of the last terrible year had happened, and the tears filled her eyes again. Lucinda said, "Plus, *look* at you. You should go back to your room, honey. Your brothers were down here looking for you."

“I can’t go back there now,” said Sissy. “When do you get off? We want you upstairs. It’s room nine-thirteen. Do you know which room I mean? They’re musicians.”

“Jesus,” said Lucinda. “All right. Yes. I know exactly who you mean.” She got up and opened a door behind her, and peered into it. She said, “Look, you’re gonna get me in trouble. I get off at three, all right? That’s an hour. I want you to go drink some water, and I’ll come up in a little while. OK?”

“Really?” said Sissy.

“I’ll try to come up for a minute.”

“Promise,” said Sissy. “Nine-thirteen.”

“Yes. God. I promise. But you—no more drinking. Not until I get there. All right? Can you promise *me*?”

“I can,” said Sissy. “And I do. I never told you my name. I’m Cecilia. Everyone calls me Sissy. But you call me Cecilia.” She held out her hand, and Lucinda held out her hand, and Sissy took Lucinda’s fingers in hers and leaned in close, and kissed the top of Lucinda’s smooth brown wrist. Her hand at Sissy’s face smelled like cigarettes and suntan oil.

“God. All right, honey,” said Lucinda, and pulled away. “You gotta get out of here.”

Sissy was nearly weightless with happiness. She backed away. The smell of Lucinda’s skin stuck to her face. And with her thumb one more time she mashed the button with the arrow pointing upward, and it awakened in light, and she watched the

numbers illuminate above the twin doors one by one as toward her the elevator fell: 3,  
and then 2, and then L.

## FOUR-PIECE

### 1. Million Dollar Bash

So without any help from radio or MTV, *Candlefingers* went gold, and *Rising* Magazine named it the Breakthrough Album of the Decade, and we recouped our advance and suddenly we were seeing royalties, and the label was chomping so hard to get us back into the studio that they agreed to renegotiate our contract. We gained one point per unit and a twenty percent increase in our next advance. Remember, this is 1998: you could still earn a living making records. And in rock music, even in our little alt-country corner of it, there was this feeling like in five years' time we'd be playing on the fucking moon. It was like how we imagined the Sixties were, except even better, since there were no wars, or assassinations, or hippies.

Laurel and I had been separated for more than a year, and I was living alone in this little extended-stay efficiency, and when I wanted to see the kids I had to go over to the house—my home, even though I wasn't allowed to stay there. So it was my suggestion to the band that we get out of town for a while to write and arrange and start tracking the next record. We rented this old mansion called Collingwood in southwestern Virginia, at the foot of the Blue Ridge, total Dock Boggs country, and we leased a bunch of gear. The label paid for all this, on top of our advance (recoupable, of course—everything was recoupable), and when it came time to pick a producer, instead of just

assigning one or giving us two or three names as he'd always done before, our A&R guy Rusty asked us, *Who do you want to work with?*

We were fucking giddy.

To help us with all these negotiations, our manager Wilbur Price drove down from D.C. for a few days. Wilbur was like fifty-three and was some kind of gonzo journalist in the Seventies, and he wore these leopard-skin sneakers and was balding on top but had this little braided rat's tail down the back of his neck. He stayed at the Holiday Inn in Roanoke, just refused to sleep in the house, which, by the way, was famous for this six-way family murder-suicide that went down there in like 1926, which I don't know, I guess we thought that was cool. So Wilbur goes, "Rocknroll cliché number one: decadence." Despite being a total LSD refugee, he talked like a movie drill sergeant. "Rocknroll cliché number two: the haunted house studio. One of you boys wanna go ahead and sign up to choke on your own vomit?"

So we got one of those oversized tablets of paper they use in office meetings, and we make a list: ROCKNROLL CLICHES. We hung it on the fridge, which was art-deco old and made noises like someone gagging. Clark had this fussy diet, and kept these organic plums and a carton of goat's milk, but the milk only kept for like two days in that fridge, and one day Wilbur, thinking it's *milk* milk, pulls it out and takes a swig—and when the taste hits his tongue he makes this face like Don Rickles mugging the camera, and he sprays sour goat's milk all over the old yellow linoleum. He goes, "This fucking *shithole*," and he throws the carton out into the backyard, and an owl—a fucking *owl*—descends upon it from the trees above. We were all stoned, and it was the strangest

funniest God-damn thing we'd ever seen, and Wilbur told us to go fuck ourselves, and Clark added at the bottom of the list: #3: *Grouchy-ass Manager*.

And Wilbur snatched the marker wrote: #4: *PATHETIC IDEALISM*.

And in the moment, even that seemed hilarious, and wonderful.

## 2. Ol' Roison the Beau

We were a four-piece now, since bringing in Matt the drummer earlier in the year, just as *Candlefingers* went gold. When we amended the contract to give him a quarter share of mechanical royalties, Matt the drummer went out and got married, and he was always saying, "I feel like I won the fucking Powerball," and we'd all started using the phrase to mean *excellent*, as in, "Have you heard the new Steve Earle? It's fucking Powerball." He was sinewy in build, and a little brutish in mannerism, as drummers tend to be. Kevin of course was doughy and baby-faced and sweet-natured, one of Clark's oldest friends—though not a founding member. Clark makes a big deal in press about how he and Kevin go back all the way to Catholic school, but some people don't realize that we didn't bring Kevin in to play bass until after *Steam Million*. By the time we were holed up in Collingwood, Clark and I were the last founding members still standing. I was the only one in the band who shared publishing royalties with him. We'd been writing together for seven years, which in my mind was a kind of sacred bond.

I was lead guitar, and also vintage keys, lap steel, some banjo, some fiddle, and did I some BGV's. Before we started making albums I used to sing lead on a few tunes at every show, but I'd pretty much accepted that those days were over. Even then, Clark



knew his role as front-man, and was starting to get a whiff of the kind of clout that gave him. He played rhythm guitar, and a little piano, and could pull off about three cross-harp riffs on the harmonica, and with his hair tousled and his baby fat and patchy scruff, he had this aura of the long-suffering nice guy: wholesome and yet tortured, educated but studiously unpretentious, middle class and yet earthy—basically the same character he’s still milking now.

He came to Collingwood equipped with a CD-R full of demos. Songs he’d written by himself, about fifteen of them. In a way, I guess, it was exciting. Or anyway, I tried to feel that way. I’d assumed of course that we’d write the new material together, since that’s how we’d always done it.

But so one night, the two of us, Clark and me, sat on the sun porch that leaned to the back of the mansion with a view of the big old lawn too dark at night to see, and Clark played his demos for me on this little boom box, which he sat on his lap like a cat. And although I was listening, I was kind of half-thinking, with a little bit of worry, I’ll admit, about the *Rising* feature. I was worried, a little bit, about how I was going to come across in the article. It’d been my first time alone with a journalist. All my other interviews had been with the group, and if you’ve read those you’ve seen how you had to basically wrestle Clark to the ground to get a word in. But Angela and I spent a whole day together, and I said some things to her, about myself, and about Clark, that were true, but that could be easily misinterpreted if my exact wording wasn’t preserved, or if a reader didn’t spend some time thinking about it.

Anyway Clark was there on the porch nodding along with his tunes in the dark—not a worry in the world, that guy, slapping his thighs where he heard drum fills in his head, and even though it was clear that he already had some strong ideas, he said, “These are just sketches, man. Just sparkler sketches on the night.”

“So when did you write these?” I asked him. “I like them.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Over the past several months, I guess? I know it’s kind of a different direction for us. But that’s exciting, you know? To feel yourself stepping into a new river.”

So I might as well be honest. Since hearing that he’d written some new songs by himself, I had wondered how publishing royalties would work. The money was never something I obsessed over, but unlike Clark, or any of the other guys, I had child support to pay. “So you were working on these during the tour,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I don’t know,” and he stiffened up a little bit. Clark was the kind of guy you could tell he expected you to be careful what you said to him—which most people went along with. He couldn’t stand conflict; it gave him stomachaches, which later he managed to turn into an ulcer. All you had to do was raise even a hint of doubt about his motives, and a little bit of that famous boyish enthusiasm would rub away like wet paint from his surface. He said, “I wrote them at home, mostly.”

“I just don’t remember hearing any of these,” I said.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “They’re new.”

And the songs were good, I’ll cop to that. On *Candlefingers* we’d found ourselves swimming toward an anthemic rock sound, though still marbled through with our

signature twang, but what Clark was auditioning for me was straight-up pop music. And I don't mean like Céline Dion, or even fucking Sheryl Crow. I mean like artful pop, the kind of pop that you could imagine people—and I'm saying people with taste, critics and scholars—still listening to in sixty or seventy years. These songs were unabashedly major key, but playfully melodic, his rhythm guitar emphasizing the quarter notes, and the melody playing across that base like a little kid, like my kids when they were toddlers and we'd be playing in the yard, and as I chased after her Lucy would run laughing away from me, darting left and then right and then back into my arms. That's how these new melodies worked. So where *Candlefingers* had been very Brian Jones, these songs were more Brian Wilson—with a huge debt, of course, to the Beatles. And actually I could envision right away the reviews that would call these songs *Beatles-influenced*, or *Beatles-derived*, and I said so. And Clark grimaced and said, "I mean, I guess. But what does that mean, exactly?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just that it's clear in these melodies and cadences that the Beatles are a huge influence."

"Yeah, but is it even possible," he said, "to *not* be influenced by the Beatles?"

"It's not an insult, for Chrissake," I said. "It's just a fact that this is what listeners, *educated* listeners, are going to hear. And I think you've done an excellent job getting at the Beatles' *thing*—the meat of it. Many have tried, and few have succeeded."

Clark laid both his hands on the still-playing boom box in his lap, like a pregnant woman cupping her belly, and he said, "I guess I just don't see: one, the good of trying to

guess what critics, of all people, are gonna hear in songs which by the way are still very much in their infancy—and two, your point in bringing it up right here and now.”

“There’s no *point*, per se,” I said. “This is just me listening to your demo, and sharing my thoughts. I thought that was the point of the exercise. I guess I’m mistaken.” I’ll admit it, I was jabbing him a little bit. I’d do that sometimes. Just because, even though he came across to everyone else as infinitely patient and adorable, it was good for him to have his buttons pushed here and again—and good for the *music*. I was like a brother, in that I was uniquely capable of locating those buttons, or anyway uniquely willing to mash them. But you know, even as I jabbed, I did it with a big smile, to show that we were just having a fucking conversation.

“All right,” he said, and intertwined his fingers on the top of his hair, like he was trying to push his head down into his body. “Fair enough,” he said. “I hear you. But for now, I just want you to listen through these, once or twice, before we start *thinking*. You know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s reasonable.”

“These tunes are still very much in their infancy,” he said. “I’m gonna need you to teach them how to walk. How to *fly*.” Listening to him tell me this in the dark, and at the same time listening to his singing on the CD, I got this weird impression that there were two Clarks talking to me at once. “Try to hear yourself in these sketches,” he said. “Listen for where your magic can light up the corners.”

So, I just listened for a little while, even though several things occurred to me. For instance that I didn’t think it was necessarily a sin to consider the critics, as they’d always

been friends to us, and comprised, in a sense, our core audience. But also, hanging around my thoughts, that last word of Clark's echoed and grew, this gathering wave of reverberation, until as I sat there, staring out the screen at the big dark antebellum lawn, I could barely hear the music beneath that word: corners.

It was my suggestion to set up the dining room as a practice space. We hauled the long wooden table out and moved all our gear in. It was a little cramped, and hot, and loud with everyone rocking out full-blast, but a dining room is where families traditionally commune, so it made sense to me at the time that this should be the room in which we shared our personal communion. Plus it was a beautiful space, with this oaken wainscoting and molded ceiling tiles way up there, and of course the crystal chandelier, which would end up on the *Displacia* album cover, which from the start was hanging over us like a huge glowing iceberg.

We played through *Candlefingers*, to limber up and also to shine a light into the familiar tunes, to look for new life inside the old structures. One thing the critics and audiences always loved about us was that our songs didn't die on the CD, but continued to evolve. We'd played a handful of gigs with Matt the drummer, but a stage performance tends to flatten out an arrangement, and so I was surprised, happily, to hear how far afield his imagination could take these old tunes there in the dining room. He was sensitive to the small shifts in a song's mood dynamics in a way his predecessor, Sean the drummer, had never been, and he was able to modulate his playing to intensify or counter those emotional rhythms, to draw out new colors. I'd never played with a drummer like him, and it choked me up to hear our songs given this new lease, so that when Clark hit me

with his curveball, I reacted, I think, more diplomatically than I might have, and maybe should have.

He goes—and this is after that other night, when he made me listen to that fucking demo CD and told me he wanted me to teach his songs how *fly*, man—he looks directly at me right in the middle of practice, and he goes, “We didn’t get a chance to discuss this, Oliver, but before we start talking producers, I think it would suit the spirit of immediacy in these new tunes if we just dived into them, all of us at once, and splashed around.”

It was dirty to bring it up in front of the other guys. It reminded me of when Laurel, when she used to want something for the kids that she knew we couldn’t afford, like a trip to King’s Dominion, or to her parents’ house in Cincinnati, she would bring it up when we were all in the car, with the kids in their car seats. “I was thinking we should go up to Ocean City in June,” she’d say. “The kids have never been to the beach.” And of course the kids would start cheering in the back seat.

But I guessed I’d learned something, because all I said to Clark was: “It’s worth a try.”

So he gave us all copies of that God-damn CD, like a geometry teacher handing out homework. And that night we all went our separate ways to have at it. Kevin, big lug that he was, had classical training, so he charted out the progressions and changes, which he’d read off a music stand until he’d committed them to memory. Matt the drummer, unburdened by chord changes and key, from the top had the most room for expression, so he listened through each track a few times but mostly waited until practice to wet his feet. My ears these days aren’t what they were, but back then I had perfect pitch and a kind of

photographic memory for structure, meaning I could listen through the CD once and know each song inside out. But that night as I laid across my big brass bed, in my room with all these spooky old oil paintings of jockeys standing beside their racehorses, I listened through the demos and found myself already hearing in them the kinds of hooks and ornaments and textures that previously had only ever emerged after hours of live arranging sessions with Clark. These compositions were so spacious, so inviting to the imagination. I could hear it right away, and of course I was right: Clark had turned a profound corner in his songcraft. He'd come a long way from the strummed chords of *Steam Million*, those opaque structures so dense that the other instruments had to arrange around them like the little walls that surround a big castle.

I sat on the floor all night with my antique Stella flat-top and my little Yamaha synth, playing the CD over and over, trying different approaches and jotting down what seemed to work. And I'll be honest. I was a little sad. I missed Clark. Or anyway I missed our process, the way we'd always worked in first stage of arranging, just the two of us in the practice space. He used to sit in the middle of the room, strumming or banging out block chords on the piano, just rolling through the main structure in a long loop, and I'd move around him, instrument to instrument, guitar to synth to lap steel to whatever, trying out different hooks and textures—and all the while we'd be rolling tape, hours of tape, and later we'd listen back, drinking whiskey and laughing at the bad ideas and making note of the best ones, and that'd give rise to new ideas—and invariably one of us would grab a guitar, and then we'd record the new ideas too. It was this kind of para-verbal rapport we and only we shared, like two magnets held apart and the electrons

tingling between them. Laurel and I never even had anything like that between us. Go listen to the last few albums, starting with *Displacia*, and then listen to *Candlefingers* or *Steam Million*, and see if you don't hear the difference. That tension on those early records, that crackling magnetism you hear—that's me and Clark. That was our energy.

But I'm not going to pretend the new process didn't turn out some interesting work. The next day in the dining room we all entered almost immediately this elevated stage where the ideas just started flowing, nonverbally, intuitively, weaving into what Clark called *this beautiful and wildly textured aural fabric*. And as we played—I think Matt the drummer was the first to notice it; I remember him pointing his drumstick and all of us looking straight up—that crazy chandelier started to sway, back and forth, over our heads, rocking and creaking and jingling. We laughed at first. It was just weird, right? We didn't try to make it *mean* anything. But we kept playing, and now that the thing had our attention, it seemed like the tighter and more intuitive our work became that night, the more widely the thing was swinging, until it was like we were onboard some ship tossing on the stormy seas. So between songs I picked up my Stella and started strumming "The Storms Are on the Ocean." Clark was the only one who even knew that song, maybe who even knew who the Carter Family were, and he started playing along, and we sang in harmonies like we used to do, and the chandelier was swinging, and it was just this mysterious, beautiful feeling. It reminded me of like *The Basement Tapes*—like we'd really tapped into the spirit of what had come before us, like we'd finally taken our place in some ancient line.



But then Clark—well, he couldn't help but be fucking *Clark*. He had to give us some hippie-dippie bullshit about how he believed it was the *spirits*, man, of that *family*, man, who had died at Collingwood, *dancing* with us, man, expressing their *gratitude* and *support*. I just kind of laughed at him, sure Clark, but all this ghost talk was actually scaring poor Kevin, who kept to the edges of the room stared up open-mouthed at the thing while we played. And so, partly because I was worried that Kevin wouldn't sleep a wink for the rest of our residency, and partly because I was just joking around, and then again partly because it was the *truth*, I said, "Seriously, Clark. Can it not be cool without it being some kind of cosmic ghostly bullshit?"

Clark with his guitar slung in front of him was holding this bottle of blue Gatorade. He was always drinking Gatorade, I don't know if he thought he was Michael Jordan or what. He just stood there staring at me, and the corners of his mouth crept downward, like he smelled something rotten.

"Come on," I said. "We're not really going to argue the plausibility of spectral telekinesis."

He took a deep breath and a long drink and smacked his lips. But he didn't say anything. He switched off his Silvertone cabinet and just strode out of the dining room, stepping over piles of cable like a man walking in deep snow. Like he was so put-upon by the *world*.

"What was that about?" said Matt the drummer, shirtless and bony behind his kit like a little kid in a pillow fort. Being in frequent physical proximity to other males was something about rock-band living I had never really gotten used to, and being around him

so often in Collingwood, shirtless like he was now, I sort of wondered sometimes if he was conscious of the difference in our builds, like how much bulkier I was. I wondered if he automatically saw me as slovenly, just because our genes expressed differently. Anyway it had fallen to me to dispel the tension a bit, so I said, “Rocknroll cliché number five: the oversensitive front-man.”

“You don’t have to an asshole about things,” said Kevin, and laid his upright bass down on its side. I admit, I was a little shocked. I’d never before heard Kevin say an unkind word to anyone.

“I *said* that because you looked like you were going to have a panic attack.”

Clark’s guitar, a left-handed ‘67 Jazzmaster that cost us eight hundred dollars just to have set up to specifications that I had helped him determine, slid off his speaker cab and tumbled against a mic stand and hit the floor with a resounding clamor.

“And that, children,” I said, “is why we use our guitar stands.”

Clark is from Boston originally (or Somerville, though he always said Boston), but we first found each other at college, right here in Fairfax. We were these two punk-weaned music geeks, back then obsessive over old-time country music. I’d been in a couple of noise bands, trying to be Sonic Youth or the Pixies, and I’d always been the front-man. I was kind of a musician’s musician; guys in other bands were always telling me how innovative my stuff was, what a great voice I had, and they were always wanting to jam with me—but audiences didn’t give a shit. It was just a squealing racket to them. Nobody would ever come see us play, and if I was playing a venue that was packed when

I got there, people would either trickle out as my set went on, or they'd just talk right over me—you know how bars are. I got into banjo music originally because it was such an affront to those fuckers. This was the heart of the D.C. suburbs, in 1991 about as anti-twang as you could get, and I was like, if you're not gonna love me anyway, then I'm going to play the most obnoxious, un-bourgeois instrument I can lay my hands on, and I'll play it in the style that will most grate on your nerves. So: old-time banjo.

Once I started in, though, I truly got to loving that music. Clawhammer, two-finger, Round Peak, Clarence Ashley, Uncle Dave Macon, I just drank it all up. Clark saw me playing at this coffee-shop open mic. Nobody else in the place was listening, or if they were listening they were yee-hawing and making *Deliverance* jokes, but he sought me out afterward and said he didn't know anyone else who knew what two-finger up-picked banjo even was, and had I heard of Roscoe Holcomb. It was like meeting your soul mate. I wanted to throw my arms around him.

So we jammed, and discovered that our voices made a near-perfect close harmony, like the undisentagable notes of a train horn, or a dial tone. We pieced together a rhythm section and a pedal-steel player and called ourselves The Brokedown Engines, before it got shortened to The Brokedowns. We played a kind of punked-up country music, and though we'd read that there were bands like us out there in the world, The Jayhawks and Uncle Tupelo and whatnot, we hadn't heard any of them. It was just that music's time—it was like this archetype rearing in the collective American unconscious: *twang*. Clark right away had that *something* that people want in a front-man. It wasn't his voice; I had just as good a voice as he did. He just made it *palatable* somehow—that

goofy talk-show host charm of his. With him in front of us, people showed up, more and more of them, and they stayed. And once those suburban kids had warmed up to the idea that country doesn't have to mean the Beverly Hillbillies or even Garth Brooks, but is the authentic American sound of loss and longing, a tragic kind of pastoral yearning, they couldn't get enough of it. We used to close our shows with this arrangement of "Alone and Forsaken"—the Hank Williams tune? It would just set those kids on fire.

Clark came to my room that night, after the ghost argument. I was laying there strumming and watching the old black-and-white TV. He sat down on my mattress and said, "So I think we owe each other apologies. It was childish of me to storm out like that, and I'm sorry."

I was covered up to my chest, with my Stella laid across the quilted spread, and I felt a bit disadvantaged in that position, like I was laid up with the flu or something. I certainly wasn't in prime negotiating posture. "Yeah, it's pretty silly to fight over ghosts," I said.

"To me, in the moment, it just seemed like a matter of atmosphere," he said, and smoothed a patch of my quilt beside him. "We had a good thing going today, and I just feel like sometimes, the negativity—and you know I don't mind getting *dark* sometimes—but the kind of vibe I'm trying to foster here, sometimes I feel like the negativity can be counterproductive. You know?"

"That's fair," I said. "Although in the interest of being understood, I feel like I have to point out that Kevin was pretty affected by the whole ghost thing."

“I don’t care about the God-damn *ghosts*,” said Clark, and shut his eyes, tight, like he was trying to visualize some place far away. “OK,” he whispered, and cleared his throat. “Here’s the thing. This *Rising* piece? When it comes out next week? It’s going to change things for us. Like, I think this is as big as getting signed was. We’re gonna get bigger venues, we’re gonna get more press, the radio is finally going—”

“I know all that,” I said. My stomach was sinking.

“No, but listen,” said Clark. “I just have this feeling, like this is our moment. Like *everything* right now is important. I feel like every word we say, every choice we make right now is a decision that weighs on the fate of this band. I feel like this moment is where we become what we will be. You see what I mean? You see why I want so bad for the energy here to be the *right* energy?”

“Sure,” I said. “Yes.” I guess I could have told him then, tried to prepare him, a little, for the article. Maybe that would even have changed things. I don’t know.

“Good.” He patted my leg over the covers. He seemed to genuinely feel a little relieved. “So how are things going?” he said. “Like with you and Laurel.”

“I mean, same as they’ve been,” I said. “Why? Do you know something?” I originally met Laurel through Clark’s wife Amy. They were old pals. We used to all four of us go out to dinner and whatnot together, before any of us were married. Clark and Amy were our witnesses when we eloped—even though, honestly, I never really liked Amy. She was too *perfect*, if you know what I mean. Blond, tall, a *business* major, kind of irritatingly confident—exactly who you’d imagine Clark would end up with. I suspected, even though I had no real proof, that she was partly responsible for Laurel

deciding we should separate. At minimum, I knew they talked all the time, which meant that Amy had heard the worst kinds of shit about me—the things I’d said and done when I was at my lowest. Which of course meant that Clark did too.

“I don’t know anything,” he said, “except what you told me, way back, about her needing stability. I’m just thinking that, if we play all our cards right? The life we’ve got ahead of us might start looking pretty good to her again. You know what I mean?”

He meant well. Fuck, I know he did. But it’s hard to take advice and encouragement about your own wrecked marriage from a guy like Clark, who all the best things have always come easy to. Even his own folks were still together, after like thirty-five years. They were these happy wealthy Boston people. They’d summer down the Cape and all that shit. There was no way he could really get it. I could have said a lot of things to his meddling, but that night anyway I had sense and compunction enough to just say, “Thanks, man.”

### 3. Silent Weekend

No wives or girlfriends were allowed at Collingwood. But Matt the drummer was a newlywed, and he was going crazy, logging onto the dial-up every night to spy on his wife’s e-mail—he had her passwords and everything. He’d read me these harmless messages she was getting from dudes in her office, about purchase orders and whatnot, and he’d go, “Does that sound suspicious to you?”

Clark of course was missing Amy, and Kevin, who I’m pretty sure was still a virgin, had his grandmother to visit, and after two weeks holed up working together I

guess we were all ready for a break, so they packed up the van to head back to D.C. for the weekend. I volunteered to stick around at Collingwood and keep an eye on all the gear. Where else was I going to go, back to the extended-stay? The *Rising* article was due out in the next week, and Clark said we should approach Monday ready to celebrate. I tried to convince myself it would turn out OK. I thought, *The Rising* loves us; they wouldn't print anything *really* destructive. Matt the drummer asked if I was sure I'd be all right by myself, and if I needed anything from up civilization way. When Clark had brought him on earlier in the year, I had thought Matt was cagey and a little jagged, a little bit prickly, but I was starting to think maybe he was an all right guy.

On Friday afternoon I stood and watched out a front window as the van disappeared up the long wooded drive. I took my guitar out on the front porch, and just sat and listened as the volume of the woods crept up, the wild wiry lace of the lonesome whippoorwills, the cranking of June bugs, the soft yodeling of owls. I sat there until the sun sank behind the house and then behind the mountain, and the woods all melted together in the dark, and the sounds began to change, the birds vanishing, the crickets beginning to whirl. There was a brittle crackling out in the shadows, old dry leaves or something, and I took my guitar and slipped inside. It was dark in there, and I didn't know why but my heart was racing.

I sat and watched some hospital drama rerun from the Eighties. The plot involved a kid sick with cancer. It made me miserable to watch it, but I couldn't change the channel. I was specifically not thinking about the article. I also didn't want to think about what really wanted to be on my mind all of a sudden, which was that I hadn't seen Sam

and Lucy in almost a month. I always tried not to think about them while I was working, because I'd get so caught up in the sadness, it became impossible for me to accomplish anything. It's true that pain deepens your creative output, but not until you get clear of it and can see it behind you. Like Townes says, you can't count the miles until you feel them. Pain while it's got you paralyzes those creative muscles. So whenever we were writing, or tracking, or mixing, or gigging, I just had to put Laurel and the kids out of my mind—which itself, when you have to reckon with that decision, to willfully forget your own family, later begets a kind of pain all in its own league. It's a whole sick cycle. But it's what you have to do, in my situation, if you want to accomplish anything. Now that I was alone, though, and not working, I couldn't shake the hurt. So finally I gave Laurel a call on my cell phone. I just wanted to talk to the kids, let them hear my voice. She knew my number, though, and she didn't answer. She hardly ever answered, and I didn't ever leave messages.

So I lay on the couch and scrolled through the other numbers in my phone, until I got to Angela's number, which I knew was what I'd been looking for. I called her up. It was only the second time since our interview that I'd actually tried to talk to her, though I'd thought about it pretty often. The first time I tried was just a few days after we'd met, after our interview. I had her number in the first place because she had called *me*, to set it all up. She'd taken the whole day to hang out with just me, just the two of us, driving around, running errands and whatnot. We hit it off pretty well. I showed her the Jiffy Lube where I worked before we got signed, and we ended up getting dinner at Strangeways in North Arlington, where The Brokedowns had played some of our first



gigs. We sat there a long time, Angela and me, just chatting and drinking, and at some point she stopped taking notes and just talked with me. She was really interested in my whole clichéd working class upbringing, my parents' busted-up marriage, my mom's drug addiction, all that *Buddy Holly Story* kind of crap. She kind of leaned her head on her fist with her elbow on the table. She had this really cute, skeptical look she kept giving me that would just kill me, like she was saying, "Now I *know* you're just fucking with me." Finally I asked her, "Hey, do you like to get high?" And in fact, she did.

So we went out to my van, and I drove us to the parking lot of her hotel, and we sat there and smoked a bowl. "I'll be honest with you," she said. She had her Doc Martens up on my dash. She said, "I know what you mean about everyone going slack-jawed for Clark. But man, I just don't see it." God, it's so obvious now, it's nauseating. She knew just exactly where my buttons were, and what order to push them in.

I said, "Well he's got that voice. That warm rasp, like a wagon wheel rolling through fine grit."

"You know, sometimes you sound like *you're* half in love with him," she said.

"Well, listen to him," I said. "Who wouldn't be charmed? You'd have to be made of stone."

"I love the music," she said. "I will grant you that. But I just don't think he's that cute."

"I mean, all right," I said. "I will admit, the cult of personality that surrounds Clark baffles me. And from the point of view of an artist who is maybe not as textbook attractive, or who maybe doesn't have the exact correct body type, but who is just as

passionate as Clark, and has been called just as brilliant—I don’t know, I forget what I was saying.”

“No, I get it,” she said. “Keep going,” she said.

“Well, just that—I’m not saying I’m *more* talented than Clark. But if I was? Would it matter? Since he’s more attractive, on someone else’s ‘rock star’ scale, some arbitrary fucking scale. Would it matter? Doesn’t he always win?” I went on like that. God, she let me go on and on. I don’t know what I thought I was doing. I don’t know if I really believed somehow that she might actually be into me—this, what, twenty-two year old girl? Whip-smart, beautiful, tough? But man, she was really listening to me. And she had her Docs up on my dashboard. Her legs stretched out in her ripped-up jeans. And whenever I used to talk to Laurel about this kind of stuff, my theories about rocknroll and sex appeal versus actual talent, she’d get so impatient with me. Your insecurity, she told me, is going to eat you alive. And yet I knew she felt inferior to Amy—you could tell, when they were together, how eager she was to agree with Amy, how her voice would take on Amy’s irritating pretty-girl lilt.

Angela, though. She was just listening to me. She was watching my mouth as I talked. We sat in the van for like two hours. And then finally she gave me this big stage-yawn—we’d run out of weed and were starting to sober up. She said she had to go. She gave me this long hug, and she whispered to me, “You deserve good things, Oliver.” God. Part of me still thinks she meant it when she said it. I mean, it’s possible she actually cared, at least in the moment, before she woke up the next day and realized what I’d given her. I don’t know. Maybe I’m still a fucking idiot.

\*

I couldn't sleep in my bedroom all that weekend. The brass bed, and the oil lamps ensconced on either side, all those horses and their creepy jockeys, it all just spooked me out. And I couldn't get out of my mind the idea that twelve people in the Twenties had eaten arsenic right there in that house. Our residence there, in a way making kitsch of their confusion and suffering, seemed not only macabre to me now that I was alone there, but disrespectful. So I slept on the couch with the TV going. I didn't turn off the God-damn TV all weekend. And then on Sunday night, Wilbur Price called me directly on my cell phone. Before I'd even said hello, he was screaming at me. "What in the *hell*, Oliver? *What in the hell is this shit?*"

"You're gonna have to be more specific," I said. Even though I knew.

"I'm baffled by the cult of personality that surrounds Clark,'" he said. "'I may not be as handsome as him, but I'm just as passionate, and just as brilliant.' *What the fuck is that?* Did we never talk about interviews? Did we not have that fucking conversation? I know we did, because I have that conversation with every—"

"That's a misquote," I said.

"It's in print!" he said. And he dropped, or threw, the receiver, and was screaming at me from across his room. "*It's! In! Print!*"

My heart was battering me pretty bad, but I waited until I could hear him breathing, and with my voice shaking I said, "That was all off the record, Wilbur."

He took a deep breath, and it was like the sound of the wind howling outside my window at night. He said in a very calm, restrained voice, "Rule number one, Oliver, is

that you're never off the record. I know you know this shit. And listen, man. I happen agree with you, OK? Yes, he's a prima donna. Yes, you're the brilliant one. But you can't *say* that stuff, kid. I can't advocate for you when you're out there handing this shit to teeny-bopper journalists."

I told him the other guys had split for the weekend. "What should I do?" I said. "Can you help me?" This all felt so familiar—a sickening echo. Right in front of me I could see that look Laurel used to give me, all anger and sadness.

"I'm in Chicago working on a new contract," he said. "I can come down next week, but for now you're gonna have to deal with it. I don't know what else to tell you. He's the front man, kid. Everyone else is replaceable. You *know* this. Front-men are forever."

#### 4. This Wheel's On Fire

On Monday I got up and took my guitar and my coffee out on the front porch, and just sat there until I saw the old work van rolling down that twisted old driveway through the trees. Clark had brought back a couple kegs of craft-brewed ale, and a full quarter of hash, and all kinds of frou-frou food and drink from the bourgeois enclave of Tyson's Corner. "What have you guys been doing out there?" I said. "Pillaging?" I looked hard at everyone's faces as they piled out of the van, but they all of them had nothing but smiles for me. And then, from this one grocery bag, Kevin pulled out the magazine. There we were. The cover of *Rising*. The words unscrolling across our chests in one of those grungy, scraped-up Nineties typefaces: THE BROKEDOWNS ON THE VERGE. It's

hard to describe what I felt, holding the thing in my hands. It was almost like holding Sam when he was born—that combination of infinite possibility with a kind of suffocating fear. I said, “So did you all read it?”

“Not yet,” said Clark, and clapped me on the back. “We voted to wait until we were all together.”

We dragged their spoils into the dining room and had a little feast. Matt the drummer set the magazine face-up on his drum throne in the middle of the room and set it spinning, all our faces looking all dizzy and nauseous back up at us gathered grinning around it. We smoked some hash. We drank some beer. I was pretty sure I was about to have a heart attack. Clark cleared his throat, twice, and said, “Oh, hey, Wilbur called me on Saturday and said the label wants us to go ahead and decide on a producer.”

“Wilbur,” I said. I was having a hard time focusing on any more than a couple words strung together.

“We talked a little about it on the drive back,” said Clark. “And we all agreed that it would be good for this record if I gave it a shot myself.”

That brought me back a little. “Wait—gave what a shot?” I said. Both Kevin and Matt the drummer were watching Clark, like waiting for some private cue from him that would allow them to speak.

Clark said, “I feel like these songs are more personal than anything I’ve put out before.”

“Well, yeah, that’s obvious,” I said. “So you all ‘talked’ about it.” I even made air-quotes. Clark looked at me sideways, I guess a little mystified by my contempt.

“We were all in the van,” he said. “We went ahead and took a vote, but we—”

“All these van votes,” I said. “What are you, a traveling congress? I’m a founding member. Does that not even rate anymore?” I actually had a right to be offended, a little. But it’s true that I was making a bigger deal out of it. I used to do this with Laurel when I knew a big fight was coming. I’d find a way to dig my heels in before we even got started.

“Your opinion is worth just as much anyone else’s.” Clark was talking like a kindergarten teacher—very deliberately patient. “Which is why I bring it up now. So you can add your vote.”

“All right,” I said. “Then I vote against Clark as producer.”

“Well, you’re out-voted,” said Clark. “Three to one.”

I turned to Kevin and said, “You know, as producer he gets an extra three percent of gross per unit. He’s already elbowed me out of publishing royalties on this record.”

“Wait—hang on,” said Clark, and put his hands up as though he were being robbed at gunpoint. “Where are you getting any of this?”

“We talked about royalties in the van,” said Kevin, ever the Clark apologist. “Clark said if we gave him a chance to produce, he’d split the production points between all of us.”

I turned to Matt the drummer, but he was staring up at the chandelier. It was swinging like crazy up there, like the house was rocking on the edge of a cliff. I knew I had no ground to stand on. I had nothing. I’d come to this point also with Laurel, this moment in which I was finally able to admit that she was right about everything: I had

never really put in the effort with her, or with the kids; I had said that all I ever wanted was a family with her, when in reality all I'd wanted was to be a rock star. Or not even to be a *rock star*, but just to be in this band—*with your hero Clark*, she said. The night before she asked me to leave, I hit that moment with her, between the end of the long horrible tension of trying and the beginning of the empty despair of having failed: this moment of serenity, when I could admit to both of us all my shortcomings. This one beautiful fucking moment. I was coming to that again, right there in that dining room. I said, "I think we should take a look at the article."

"I already read it," said Clark.

"Wait, what?" said Matt. "I thought we—"

"Wilbur gave me a heads up," said Clark. His eyes were trained right on me, and they were full of something I didn't expect to see. Fucking *forgiveness*. "You know, Oliver," he said, "at first I was pissed. I really was. I was ready to let you go."

"Hang on," said Kevin. "What's this, now?"

"But it's been a rough year for you," said Clark. "There's a lot of pressure on you that none of the rest of us have. I know it." He was practically *doe-eyed* with magnanimity. It made me sick—to be pardoned by him. He wasn't my father, and he wasn't my priest, and he wasn't my kids, and he surely wasn't my fucking boss. He was my best friend, nothing more. "You know what, Clark?" I said. "I meant it all. I did. Everything Angela printed in that article is true. I am the center of talent in this band."

Clark lowered his eyes. He looked regretful as hell, but also I think he kind of knew I was right. The other guys looked away from him. I felt a little like I was going to

puke. But what was I supposed to do—take it all back? It was already in print. And it was the truth.

I said, “Angela agreed with me. All that stuff I said, she agreed with it.”

“All right,” said Clark. “That’s enough.”

“And Wilbur agrees with me too.”

“*Enough.*”

“It’s not enough,” I said. Now I was just leaning into the fall with all my weight.

“Not until you admit that I’m right. Not until you admit that you’re only the fucking front-man because you’re better looking than me. Because your adorable face sells more records.”

He gave me this look of pity—he even shook his head, like a bad mime showing the audience just how bad he feels.

And right at that moment came that terrible sound above us, of rotten wood buckling and cracking, and a groaning like a man’s voice. And beside me Matt the drummer said, “Shit—get out of the way,” and he dove toward his kit. I looked up in time to see the chandelier’s chain break free of its harness and the whole thing drop into space: slow as a big fat snowflake. I remember tripping over myself getting out of the way, and Kevin on my right just kind of sitting down on the floor and covering his head with his arms. And at the same time I remember seeing Clark, with his hand on our issue of *Rising*, just looking straight up like Wile E. Coyote as the iceberg came straight down on top of him.



## 5. Odds and Ends

Was it Clark's ghosts? Was it all that *negative energy*, man, caused by all my *negativity*?

Tell you what I think. I think it was harmonic entropy. Like guitar strings vibrate each other at harmonic intervals, or snares rattle when you hit a certain bass note. Collingwood was vibrating sympathetically with our falling-apartness. That's just a guess, but I don't think it's any more goofy than all of the others I've heard.

You know the rest. Everyone knows the rest. The rest went platinum. And I can't deny they ultimately made a good album. At moments it's even great, in its way. Although, and this probably sounds like sour grapes, but I still think the song titles that ended up on *Displacia* are pretty corny. "Three Broken Ribs," "Skull Fracture," "Two Shattered Wrists," "Miscellaneous Lacerations"—come on. Admittedly, I hate concept albums; I don't think that's any surprise. Whenever a band wants my opinion of some record they've made, if it's even faintly redolent of concept, I just flat-out tell them: start over.

Even still, when I finally got around to listening to the record, I was kind of surprised about how much track one affected me. Even the title, even though it's so unsubtle. "Four-Piece"—it kind of kills me. Worse than seeing the old Christmas photos of me and Laurel and the kids all together. And then of course the last track, "Three-Piece," which—I know you're not going to buy this, but I've still never, after all these years, been able to bring myself to listen to it. Not once.

I'll be honest, I like that Clark and the guys went on from *Displacia* to explore just a bunch more clichés: the painkiller addiction record, the dissonant detox record, even the insufferable new-lease-on-life record. I don't even mean I just like it ironically. It's genuinely kind of beautiful to me—one pearly cliché strung up after another. Of course the real rocknroll cliché #1 is the songwriting team of rivals—two geniuses pinging off each other until they can't stand it anymore and one finally makes his coup. The Everlys, The Clash, Floyd, The Eagles, The Smiths, Uncle Tupelo, Oasis, the fucking Beatles. That's rocknroll: a chorus of clichés. If you're doing it right, you're just invoking all these cirrhotic ghosts to guide you in their boot prints. Every kid that grows up listening to rocknroll wants nothing except to join that choir. I actually made it. I sang in that chorus. I played my part. And I gave up everything I loved to get there

## HOME INVASIONS

### 1

Because Gordon DiPippa did not talk to his neighbors, and because he did not like his wife Greta to talk to them either, reports of home invasions in his neighborhood first came to him through his mailbox. A police flyer asked him to report sightings of unfamiliar vehicles or suspicious pedestrians, and in the neighborhood association newsletter, *Leaves of Ivy*, he read a three-page article drawing on interviews with several residents whose homes had been violated. Each reported evidence of forced entry: windows broken inward and unlatched, French doors pried apart, perhaps with a crowbar. And although the intruder, or intruders, had left indicators that seemed not only sloppy but ostentatious—dresser drawers pulled out, televisions left blaring, cash and jewelry moved from one room to another, in one case bone china removed from its hutch and stacked on the dining room table—none of the victims had yet found any signs of theft or vandalism.

DiPippa was planning to leave his wife, had even shared his plans with his lover, Mary Grace, but nonetheless these invasions made him anxious for Greta's safety. They'd been married seventeen years. She was a homemaker, by his own insistence; he held a high position in missile defense contracting and made enough, as long as the Soviets were around, that any wife of his would never have to work. They had no children together, and her grown son Thomas lived up in Maryland. Their house lay

tucked in a pocket of woods accessed by a private lane of narrow, winding blacktop, and although DiPippa had selected this site for the very fact of its isolation and concealment, he worried now that these qualities might make of it an especially attractive target for this home invader, whatever the criminal's purpose. That the break-ins seemed timed, so far, for moments when the houses were left empty was, he knew, no guarantee of Greta's safety, and so, after reading the police flyer and the article in *Leaves of Ivy*, DiPippa found himself afflicted with the same restlessness, tingling in his extremities, and shortness of breath he used to suffer, years ago, when he believed Greta was about to, or might one day, have an affair.

In the evenings after he left the office, he would ride the Orange Line to East Falls Church and from there drive to Mary Grace's cramped South Arlington apartment, with its tan carpet and chipboard cabinets. But where before he would disrobe immediately and lie reading the paper in bed until she was showered and ready for him, now he sat smoking at her dining room table. She came out of the bathroom, naked but for a red towel wrapped around her head. "Hey, please don't smoke in here, will you?" she said. "I just washed my hair. It's not like I haven't asked you before," and she disappeared into the bedroom. Her dresser drawers slid and thumped.

She bartended at a Northwest D.C. tavern called Filbert's in which for many years DiPippa had drunk alongside embassy staffs and TV news crews, although since starting up with Mary Grace nine months ago, he had stopped patronizing the place, and tried often to persuade her to quit. "What would you have me do?" she'd asked him. She said

she'd given up enough, taking lunch shifts twice a week so she could see him in the evenings.

Now he said, "I'm thinking of installing one of these house alarms. Mike Worrell suggested it. You remember him." He paused, to see if she would admit to remembering Worrell, but she did not respond. "When you come into your house you have, I don't know, half a minute to type in a numeric code, or else an alarm sounds. Some systems will even send a call to the police. The company puts these detectors on all your windows and doors."

"I know what a burglar alarm is." She came out in a T-shirt and jeans, her black hair damp and tousled. To see her already clothed troubled him. She took the burning cigarette from between his fingers and dropped it into the glass of water into which he'd been tipping his ashes. "Please respect my home," she said, "will you?"

He grabbed her wrist and stared up at her wide eyes. Her volatility excited him. He often rubbed against the grain of her tolerance, feeling for her triggers, and recoiled when he touched them, chastised and thrilled. He said, "I want you to stop wearing make-up. You're beautiful enough without it."

"Are you going to buy me a burglar alarm too?" She tugged against him, but didn't free herself. "The burglars in my neighborhood don't just rearrange your wine rack." He pulled her to him and lifted her shirt and pressed his lips to the soft rim of her navel, and after a moment her abdomen relaxed. He rose and took her upper arm in his hand and led her to the bed. On nights he did not see Mary Grace he sometimes used liquor to dampen the buzz of his nerves, but it was hardly effective. Although it was

perhaps true that Mary Grace, with her contentiousness and unreliable nature, was herself a source of agitation, he relied on their lovemaking. But tonight he was distracted in the dark by an image of his house: the television flickering inside, Greta in there, sitting by herself; and after thirty minutes Mary Grace groaned and pushed him away with the heel of her palm and said, "It's not happening tonight. I'm just too tired." And when he did not immediately pull out of her, she pushed him again, more firmly, and said, "Gordon, get off me." He rolled away, irritated the banishment.

When he had brought up the possibility of leaving Greta, he and Mary Grace had just made love for maybe the tenth time, following a terrible argument about her having failed to meet him for dinner. They had nearly come apart, and in the euphoria of rapprochement he had said, "I was thinking I might move out of the house. Get my own place downtown." She didn't respond, and he lifted his head to read her face. She opened one eye, looked at him, and closed it again. "Really," she said. The flux of her interest was a thread by which she dangled him over the void. Since that night, he sometimes mentioned Greta just to see whether Mary Grace would remind him of that conversation, and then he'd wonder what it meant that she never did.

Now he pulled the blanket up over himself, to his chest, and she rose to go to the bathroom, her white back moving away from him. He reached across the bed for the telephone and called home. On the third ring Greta picked up: "Hello?" Her terse German vowels reminded him of the times, years ago, when he used to call in the middle of the day just to make sure she was there, and how the sound of her frustration and unease at the silence on his end of the line had excited him.

He held his breath in the darkness and waited for another “Hello.” But she did not repeat herself. She only hung up the phone.

He’d first considered leaving Greta long before he met Mary Grace, who was his first real affair. He’d embarked on a series of encounters with other women, maybe five or six of them, but those were women with whom he wouldn’t have tried to keep up a conversation, let alone an affair; he picked them up in bars he would never otherwise have been seen in, and after leaving their filthy little apartments, no less unsettled than when he had entered, he never saw or spoke to them again. This was years ago, when he was in his forties and Greta was in her thirties, and with Thomas at boarding school in Vermont DiPippa was certain that every man with whom Greta exchanged glances at a party, or in the supermarket for that matter, appeared on his doorstep the moment his car left the neighborhood. But as Greta grew older and wore her make-up in subtler shades or not at all, and her clothes less coquettishly, and as on the street or in the market other men’s eyes seemed less drawn to her, and as she and DiPippa no longer went to parties—as her opportunities to betray him became fewer, he no longer felt driven to allay, by fucking another woman, the anxiety raised in him by having a beautiful wife.

They had entered then a long period of strange contentedness. Where her chirpy long-distance conversations with her aunts and cousins had incensed and aroused him with their opacity (he’d never learned German, avoiding the banality of actual meaning), now when he heard them he found comfort in the words’ familiar tenderness. Where she had once lunched with his friends’ wives—joined occasionally, maddeningly, by one of

his friends—now she stayed home all day, just as he had wished she would, watching television and reading silly German romance novels, and then not even romance novels but political thrillers, and every evening she was so happy to see him—“Hello, darling,” she would say, and take his briefcase and coat. She would call him in the middle of the day to give a charming account of something she had seen in the woods that surrounded the house, some God-damned robin’s nest, some fox cub. Or to tell him she had found a yellow crocheted cap her former mother-in-law had made for Thomas when he was a tiny babe. And where, in an earlier time, any mention of her previous marriage, to an Army corporal named Bill Winstead, had dunked DiPippa into a black mood that lasted days, now he felt a charitable curiosity, and even perhaps a shade of Greta’s nostalgia for the man, a nostalgia that had dimmed in Greta to a respectable shade. The poor bastard was dead, after all, his son exiled in Vermont: why bother with jealousy? He’d nothing left to covet. Greta belonged to him alone.

And then it happened that one day at the office he turned on his computer and started his word processor, and rather than preparing for his presentation, which he was soon to deliver to an SDI lieutenant general and White House senior defense advisors, on developments in the guidance systems of terminal phase interceptors, he began instead to compose a letter to Greta, in which he explained to her why it would be better for both of them if they were to separate. His reasons, unspooling from some space hidden from him in his own mind, shocked him. He did not believe, he wrote, that she could ever be wholly happy with him in the prison in which he had dropped her. She must want a more vibrant life than he would ever be willing to give her.



He read these words over and shuddered at their undeniable truth.

And then he began to write a second paragraph, in which he told her how deeply he loved her, and in which he recounted the day he first saw her, at the June morning wedding of their friends Martha and Christian Welty—how beautiful Greta had been in her green sun dress, with freckles on her shoulders and her toenails painted violet, how full of life, like the June morning itself, and then he stopped typing, for he could not see the computer screen through the fog of his tears. He thought, My God, I don't want to lose her.

But he returned to the letter, again and again, for many months. He would open it to revise it or just to run his eyes over the words, edging himself again to the brink of its terrifying truth—that he had not satisfied her, that she must be on the verge of abandoning him—and again, placated by the memory of their shared lust, he would back away. Twice in anguish and guilt he deleted the entire file, only to recreate it one week later. He saved the letter to a floppy disk and carried it in his briefcase. And some nights if he lay unsleeping long enough beside her, listening to her deceptively contented breathing, he would slip out of the bedroom and lock himself in his study, where he would pour a glass of bourbon, and turn on his computer, and turn over again what he had written.

But at last the letter's power dwindled, and he was forced again to admit that she was, indeed, happy enough. And now when she greeted him at the door he could no longer scrape up the effort to give her a decent kiss. He no longer found the patience to take her silly calls at the office. He could only occasionally rally the lust to make love to

her. And when she seemed to sense his fatigue, and she no longer rose from the couch to meet him at the door, and gave up her own attempts to seduce him, the relief spread like Novocain through him.

He made some calls and got in touch with a security company that installed alarms in the homes of senators and ambassadors, and even some federal offices, such as the Department of the Interior. The salesman whose name was James flattered DiPippa by trying to sell him security measures so far beyond his needs as to seem ridiculous: spotlights, surveillance cameras on a closed circuit, dogs, guards armed with machine guns. He made an estimate appointment, and as soon as he had hung up, he called home. He did not want to talk to Greta, only to hear her “Hello.” But the phone rang five, and then six, and then seven times and then the machine picked up, his own voice talking at him. (He had insisted that he be the one to record the message, for even before the home invasions, he had not wanted to give a caller the impression, even subliminal, that Greta was home alone.) He hung up and dialed again, and again his recorded voice answered, and, with the strange impression that he was leaving a message for himself, he said, “It’s me. Call me when you hear this.”

At home in the garage Greta’s green Volvo wagon occupied its spot like a sleeping dog. But he came into the kitchen and what met him was an unfamiliar silence—a disturbed stillness, as though moments before, the house had been filled with water, everything set uneasily in place, the table, the chairs, the toaster oven, the answering machine blinking at him from the breakfast bar. “Greta,” he called out. “Hello?”

In the air he sensed the fine sibilance of the television running, and he went to the living room, but the couch was empty, the fleece throw a rumpled pile at one end. He had been wrong, the television was not on: its screen a dead gray eye. Whatever he had sensed was silent now. The stillness in the house was so complete that he knew he was alone.

He headed for the bedroom, and in the dim hall a panic mounted him, and when he came into the room he found only the lonesome amber glow of Greta's bedside lamp. But now he saw, with a surge of exhilaration, even vindication, that one of the chiffonier drawers was open, just enough to drop a shadow—the third drawer, in which he kept his blue jeans and his casual slacks, and when he looked in, his folded pants seemed indeed to have been lifted from their places and moved around, their neat squares slightly puckered. “Jesus Christ,” he said. He opened each drawer, and in each drawer the clothes had been handled, rumpled. He went to the closet, where the overhead bulb was already lit, and on his side of the closet, where normally all his suits hung to the far left and his casual shirts and sport coats to the right, parted like curtains, now they all hung together, willy-nilly. And on Greta's side, beneath her dresses, the lids of her shoeboxes sat uneasily, and yes, some sat askew, and at his feet lay a red puddle—an evening gown—the sequined shoulder straps twinkling on top, as if she had vanished right out of it.

From telephone on his bedside table he called the police. He said, “There's been a break-in. And I think an abduction.” The emergency operator asked him if the intruder was still in the house, and DiPippa said, “That's what I'm telling you. He's gone, and my wife is gone too.” And with a voice as even as a dial tone the operator proceeded to

swamp him with questions, ridiculous questions—Where are you in the house? Do you own any firearms?—questions on some list, some standardized form, not any questions that arose from the situation itself, that indicated she was listening and understood the situation. He stood at the wall of glass at the back of the room and looked down upon his woods, a corrugated darkness. He tried to feel some presence out there, someone looking back at him, but he felt nothing. He was alone on all his property.

Surely she had not left him.

The place did not look as one imagined a crime scene should look. But wasn't it exactly the subtlety of effect that made this home invader so insidious? He tried to recall the article in *Leaves of Ivy*. The emergency operator said, "Sir. Are you still there?"

"Never mind," he said. "Forget it. Good-bye."

He yanked the duvet toward the foot of the bed, and then pulled away the top sheet, which resisted like a weed, so tightly had Greta tucked it in. He stared at the exposed bottom sheet, cream-colored, turgid and shining, although he did not know what he was looking for. The phone began to ring, and he grabbed for it and answered, his voice a stone in his throat.

"This is Emergency Services"—the same God-damned operator—"returning a disconnected call from your number. Do you have an emergency?"

"No!" he said, and slammed the receiver, and the bell released a single, aggrieved note into the stillness. Another call began to ring. He went into the bathroom. The medicine cabinet was ajar. Greta's bottles of Dexedrine and Valium were gone. He heard the answering machine beep out in the kitchen, and he listened: his own ghostly voice

floated to him, followed by the voice of the emergency operator. And then another beep, long and final. His collar prickled against his throat. He went to the kitchen: it was dark and frigid as a cellar. The answering machine's tiny red light twitched. He played the tape. "Hey. It's Thomas," said the first message. "I'm sorry I can't find your office number. Apparently Mom was arrested today? She called the house. Diane talked to her. I'm leaving the office. Call me at home."

A beep, and DiPippa's own voice barked at him from the speaker: "It's me. Call me when you hear this." The meaning of what Thomas had said emerged as slowly as if DiPippa were translating from another language. The cassette tape's reels turned beneath the tinted plastic lid.

A second message started, Thomas again. His voice quieter now. "So, Mom is in jail. There are two breaking and entering charges. I can't bail her out until she's arraigned, which is supposed to happen Monday, so I guess she's going to spend the weekend locked up."—the fretful *chick! chick!* of a cigarette lighter—"I talked to my lawyer; well, you know Ryan Young. He recommended me a criminal guy. Bert Baucom? I don't know. I'm waiting to hear from him. She told me not to call you, but, I don't know." For a moment the speaker only hissed. And Thomas said, "Are you two having some kind of trouble? It's not my—"

DiPippa stopped the tape.

The last time Greta had really talked to him, not simply reported on some trivial domestic matter, had been four months ago, not long before the first of the invasions, in the muted liminal stretch between Christmas and New Year's Day. They had spent Christmas morning at Thomas's house (a townhouse, actually, slotted between identical townhouses, among acres of identical townhouses in Laurel, Maryland) with Thomas's wife Diane and their infant daughter, who had done nothing all morning but cry until her face had looked like an unripe plum. Greta had not decorated their own home that year, and DiPippa, who had never seen Christmas as anything beyond a large scheduled expenditure, and who had always felt that even the most tasteful Christmas decorations gave a place an air of embarrassing drunkenness, had seen no reason to ask her about the missing tree, or the lights and wreathes. And so when he came home this night, after having spent the evening with Mary Grace, the house was as tidy and sober as any other evening of the year in which he might enter to find Greta installed on the couch, in her pink silk robe, her shoulders hung with the fleece blanket as if she were an orphan brought in out of the cold. He went straight to the shower without even giving his customary excuse, that he'd spent the evening at the gym. He dressed in his robe, made himself a drink, and reclined in his plush chair to page through one of his news magazines as she gazed at the television. And he was startled when she said to him, briskly, as though she'd been waiting to say it, "I was thinking today, about something you told me many years ago. When we were dating."

Most nights they said nothing to one another, or if they spoke they spoke only of some purchase to be made, or of the petty politics that surrounded DiPippa in his office. And more, the word *dating* surprised him, like a pinch on the thigh, for there had been between them, for many years, a de facto moratorium on speaking of their younger days together, as though those happy times had traumatized them, as though by reminiscing over their early affections they might rake open some shared scar. Something about Greta's tone made him fearful she was launching into some kind of overture. He set his drink down, and gave her his attention. She was still looking at the television. She sat with her feet drawn beneath her, one hand holding her other wrist as though she were injured. She said, "It was a story you told me about your mother."

"What story?" he said. Greta had never known his mother; she had killed herself when he was twenty and away at Rutgers. He could imagine no reason for having mentioned her.

"You told me," Greta said, "that when you were a small boy, you did something to anger her, and that as punishment, she refused to speak to you for an entire month." The television was a distant star in each of her eyes. "Do you remember telling me this?" she said.

"No," said Gordon in an accidental whisper. He cleared his throat, and said again, "No."

"It was usually that you told me anything about your childhood only when you were in your cups. I would save up my questions about you for the nights you'd bring your whiskey over with you. Though I never told you that." Her accent seemed more

pronounced than he had noticed in years—the consonants hissing, the vowels held in the back of her mouth. “But this I remember quite clearly, because you were not drunk. We had just made love. We were smoking in the bed.”

“I don’t remember,” he said, although he did remember. He picked up his drink and the ice rattled.

“All these years since you told me that story, whenever I’ve recalled it, I’ve thought, my God, how unimaginable, for a small boy to be abandoned in this way. What a cruel woman she must have been. But also, how unwell she must have been. How long she must have been wounded. How unbearably sad for both of you.” A faint smile crossed her pale face, her pale thin lips, and was gone. She said, “I never in all these years questioned what kind of a man such a mother would make of a boy.” And here she paused, and her chest rose with a deep, prefatory breath, and now her cold eyes turned to him. He lowered his gaze to the magazine in his lap. She did not speak again. She did not even seem to exhale. She rose, and turned off the television, and set the remote control in its basket, and folded the blanket and laid it across the back of the couch, and without another word went to bed.

He had not looked at the letter on the floppy disk for more than three years. All its fertile possibilities had long ago dried to dust. And so with nowhere to plant the strange seed of this conversation, he had just let it go.

When he asked Thomas what Greta had said on the phone, Thomas said, “I’m driving down. I don’t want to do this on the phone.”



“Do what?” said DiPippa. “It’s after eleven.”

“I’ll come by in the morning. Around nine.”

“I’ll be at the office. What is there that can’t be discussed on the phone?”

“Gordon, take the God-damn day off,” said Thomas. “For Christ’s sake.”

Now he lay in bed, still wearing his tie and his dress shoes. Beside the phone stood a glass of scotch, which he had not touched. He lay staring at the room around him. Its emptiness seemed to vibrate. According to the detective he had talked to on the phone, his dresser and his closet had been violated not by some mysterious pervert but by the officers who had taken Greta, in a search incidental to her arrest. They were looking for evidence related to the neighborhood break-ins, of which they suspected her. Whether they had found any evidence (and what was there to find, when each of the victims had reported nothing stolen?), and what evidence they already had sufficient to issue a warrant for her arrest, the detective would not say. “All this information will be available to her attorney,” he said, as though he were speaking to a child. “We cannot discuss it over the phone.”

Suddenly no one in the nation was capable of discussing anything over the telephone. When he called the county jail, the desk attendant would not let him speak to Greta. When he asked whether he could see her, the attendant told him he would have to come by in the morning to schedule a visit. Could he not schedule the visit over the phone? “Sir,” said the desk attendant, “What’d I just say?”

He dialed Mary Grace. She said, “Oh shit, was I supposed to meet you somewhere?”

“I’m at home,” he said. “Honey, Greta’s been arrested.”

She released a chiming little laugh. “What do you mean?”

“My wife,” he said, “is being held at the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center. They’ve accused her of breaking into my neighbors’ homes.”

Again she gave him her little laugh—she took nothing seriously. “Are you fucking with me?”

“I need to know,” he said, “whether you’ve ever called my house. Or sent me anything by mail. Or by any other means made it possible that Greta knows you exist.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“She didn’t call me,” he said. The childish whine in his voice surprised him. “She called Thomas. She told him not to even notify me. Why would she have done that?”

“I hope you’re not trying to blame me for something,” said Mary Grace. “I haven’t done anything. I haven’t called anyone.”

“I need you to be absolutely sure,” he said.

“Didn’t you tell me you were planning to leave her anyway? Or did I imagine that little conversation?”

“This is not the time for that,” he said. “She’s in *jail*.”

“Yeah. You said that.”

“She’s still my wife,” he said. “It’s my responsibility to see to her well-being.”

“Sure, Gordon,” said Mary Grace. “You do what you have to do.” And then she hung up.

To hell with her.

He picked up his glass of scotch and set it on his belly. He went over in his mind the detective's ludicrous accusation: that Greta, for some reason unapparent to anyone, had been breaking into their neighbors' homes. That she had stolen nothing, but had simply been *rearranging* things. He tried to imagine it. Greta with a rock in her hand, smashing a window. Greta prying French doors apart—with a crowbar! Were they insane?—to imagine that she was capable of such things? Was *he* insane, to not see in her such an aptitude? Such proclivity?

And yet. Lying here, the image emerged more clearly: Greta, her robe, her tired eyes, her fine blond hair faded to steel gray and bound behind her head in a bun. Greta standing in some stranger's living room. Running her fingers over the cool, alien surface of another man's table and dresser. Sitting on some stranger's couches, alone. He could see it, as if he were a ghost in the room with her.

Did she smile? He imagined her smiling. When she picked up some stranger's belongings, a stack of cash, a pair of pearl earrings, and held them in her palm, carried them in her hand to another room, did she purse her lips and widen her eyes?—as he had once watched her do, years ago, sitting beside him at a dinner party, when his hand parted her linen skirt and cupped firmly the crotch of her panties, hot to his touch?

Did she lie in some stranger's bed, alone, as he now lay alone in their bed?

Was his own bed also the bed of a stranger?

He set his glass aside, and unbuckled his belt.

\*

Thomas spoke of this criminal lawyer, Bert Baucom. He and DiPippa sat smoking at the kitchen table, and between them lay three slices of toast, untouched, a quarter stick of butter sagging on a saucer, and a crystal pitcher full of orange juice. “He’s supposed to go over there this afternoon, to the jail, to talk to Mom. He said he won’t know what kind of evidence they have until he gets the arraignment paperwork, but he’s guessing they must have videotape. He says every God-damn house around here has some kind of security system. I raised the possibility of fingerprint evidence.”

“They wouldn’t have anything to compare prints to until after they arrested her,” said DiPippa.

“That’s what Bert says too. I don’t know.” Thomas worked for a Navy contractor in Maryland. He was a civilian, although his solemn demeanor, and his crew cut, and his manicured mustache made it clear that he wished to be seen as a military man. But his mother had given him her willowy build and her easy blush, and these features did not become him as they did her; he was instead doomed to project the airs of a sensitive boy playing at manhood. He brooded and smoked and swore, but the waggle of the Adam’s apple in his narrow neck undermined his self-conscious intensity.

“Well let me ask you,” said DiPippa. “Because I can’t make sense of it.” He and Thomas had never had occasion to speak in this private way about Greta. They’d always kept their relationships with her discrete, and to feel as though he was asking Thomas for access to some intimate possession discomfited him. “Do you suppose this is possible? That she’s guilty of these things?”

Thomas averted his gaze and flicked his ashes. He said, his voice strained, “You know her better than I do.” DiPippa leaned in toward him. Thomas avoided his eyes. His father, Winstead, the corporal, had sent Thomas to that boarding school in Vermont, the Halsey Academy, years before DiPippa had even known the boy or his mother existed. But after DiPippa and Greta had married, she mentioned to him once—in the darkness, just as he was falling asleep—that she would perhaps like it, now that they were settled, if Thomas could move home. “Home,” said DiPippa. “What about school?” Thomas was fourteen. Greta said she thought perhaps he could finish his schooling here, in Oakton. “Oh, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” DiPippa said. “He’s suffered so much upheaval already. No, I think consistency is what he needs.” And Greta had not argued, and she had never raised the issue again, and Thomas had finished at the Halsey Academy and had gone on to Stanford, where he had met Diane. And DiPippa, caught over the years in terse and stilted conversations with the boy, sometimes worried that Greta had told Thomas about that discussion. DiPippa had been half-asleep when she’d brought it up—and it had been in the first year of their marriage, after all; could DiPippa be blamed for wanting Greta to himself? For a short while, at least?

Thomas said, “Did something happen between you two? Are you fighting, or...”

“Nothing,” said DiPippa. “Nothing she’s made me aware of, anyway.” He poured himself more juice, although his glass was nearly full. “Did she tell you differently?”

“She hasn’t told me anything.” Thomas’s throat jounced like a fishing bobber. “I know it’s not my business.”

“Of course, there are things,” said DiPippa. “There are always *things*, within a marriage, that fall short of the ideal. By which I mean, there are always mistakes that one or both parties will make. There will always be regrets.”

“Well, sure,” said Thomas. “Of course. I of all people know that.” But he did not understand. How long had he been married—four years? With his fresh face, and his unquestioning obedience, he was a perfectly measured complement to Diane: that hard, nagging frau. Even given ten years more—twenty years more—Thomas would never quite be able to understand how DiPippa had lost Greta inside their marriage. Thomas was himself too much like her. “I just wonder,” Thomas said, “because this isn’t the first time she’s done this.”

“The first time she’s done what?” said DiPippa.

“Well, so. All right.” Thomas turned both his palms up in front of him, as if to introduce a magic trick. “When I was a kid,” he said, “before my dad died—this was back in Delaware—I remember Mom getting arrested once. For breaking into our neighbor’s house.”

DiPippa sat still, as if hoping the moment, like a lion, might pass him.

“I guess they didn’t press the charges,” said Thomas, “because as far as I know, she never went to trial. She spent a couple nights in jail, and I wouldn’t even have known about that, except that my dad was always screaming at her. Every time he got drunk, he’d throw it in her face.” He bowed his head. “It’s not my place to tell you this. But you’ve always taken good care of her, and I respect that.”

“Was your father having an affair?”

A half-grin crossed Thomas's mouth, pushing his mustache off-balance. "What?" he said.

DiPippa said, "Did she tell you I'm having an affair?" And Thomas froze, and his mustache straightened out. DiPippa said, "She must know. What other reason could she have for behaving in this way?"

Red streaks rose on Thomas's cheeks and neck, as though he'd been physically lashed. His jaws throbbed. "She didn't tell me anything like that."

"It's this bartender. It's been going on for months." DiPippa ducked his head closer to Thomas, to see his eyes, but Thomas turned his face away. "It's the only explanation that makes any sense," said DiPippa. "I mean, isn't it?"

"That's none of my business," said Thomas.

"Yes, nothing is anyone's fucking business." DiPippa leaned back in his chair. "Nobody—tells anyone—anything." He slammed his open palm on the table hard enough to upset both glasses of juice. The orange puddles, bright as flame, rushed unstoppably across the tabletop and toward the edges.

The story he had told Greta was true. His mother had not only refused to speak to Gordon for three weeks (not quite a month, but near enough), she pretended that he had ceased to exist. He was nine. They lived together in one room in a labyrinthine apartment house in Detroit. There were no windows. The ceilings were high and disappeared into shadow. She worked at an iron mill, and although she worked in the mill's office, she came home each evening smelling of coke fire and rust. He shared a mattress with her,

and when late at night the neighbors would yell or scuffle in the hallways, their hard voices so clear they might have been inside the room, and Gordon's breathing would grow shallow and quick, his mother, lying beside him, would stroke the tops of his legs with her cool fingertips, and the neon buzz of his anxiety would dim, slowly, and melt finally into sleep.

She began to ignore him because he had spoken angrily to her. She had refused to buy him something, or to take him somewhere—there was some promise she could not keep, and she was haughty and defensive in her breaking of it, and he had called her, as he had once heard a man call her, a lying bitch. And just as if by calling her this name he had spoken some magical incantation that had erased him from existence, the moment he uttered the words his mother's eyes glazed over, and she looked past him—through him. When he spoke, and then yelled at her, "Please listen to me, I'm sorry, please," she did not hear. If he stood in her path, she would knock him out of the way, without force and without notice. He was a slight child, and he was afraid to touch her, to grasp at her skirt, to clutch her arm, for he could not predict how she might respond. She began to cook only enough food for herself; he had to wait until she finished at the hot plate and fry his own potatoes as he'd seen her do. She began to lie sprawled in the middle of the mattress, and when he cried at night on the rough wood floor beside her, she yawned and turned over. She went to work every morning, but he stopped going to school. He had convinced himself that if he left the room he would truly vanish, like a ghost that leaves its haunting ground, blown away by the wind. And then one morning she left and didn't come back for three days. Each night she was gone he lay on the floor beside the bed, listening, and



all day he listened at the walls and at the door, held his breath and tried to make hope of each passing voice or footfall. And when at last she did come back, with a sack full of groceries, she looked at him and she said, "Are we sick of potatoes for dinner yet, Gordon?" And he stood there, staring at her, afraid to speak, watching as she put up the groceries in the cupboards, and when she turned to him again, and said, "What's wrong, love?" and he began to weep, and she came to him, and kneeled, he crushed his face against her chest, sucking in with ecstatic relief the smell in her blouse and in her hair of smoke and iron and sweat, and she embraced him, and kissed the top of his head, and said, with great sincerity and kindness, "Darling, what is it? What's happened? Tell Mama."

When Greta had said he would only share his past with her when he was drunk, she had confused their timeline; the night he told her the story, he had never yet been drunk with her. They had been seeing one another for only two weeks, and he'd not had a single drink since the morning he'd met her, the morning of the Welty wedding, when they had danced. When he told the story, they had just made love for the second time, and their lovemaking had kindled in him a peculiar feeling: a calmness, or safety, which he had never before felt. All his life the world and its people had seemed to him a gallery of leering threats, to whose danger he could occasionally numb himself but which he could never escape. But Greta had taken him into the sanctuary of her body, and he could rest. And for their first few years he clung to that comfort, hid it in his home and guarded it with missiles, until he realized, with that strange dismay, that it was not going anywhere.

But on this second night together, the comfort glowed as steady and fragile as a light bulb filament. Greta felt it as well; she said, “This is nice. This is my favorite feeling. Like we don’t have to go anywhere, or do anything.” They lay on their backs, their arms and legs crossed in the middle of her bed. They spoke in soft voices. They blew their cigarette smoke at the ceiling fan, and watched it rise gently and then jerk away.

Mary Grace began to call the office, and then the house. He did not take her calls, and he did not return them, and finally, after leaving a message, she stopped trying. “Well, I guess you finally got what you wanted out of that marriage,” she told the machine. “I get it. God knows I’ve spent half of my life chasing assholes that ended up in jail. I just never got one to marry me.”—that callous, fire-crackling laugh. “The sad thing,” she said, “is that you and me actually deserve each other. Couple of sad fucking nutcases, digging up the same old graves.”

Greta, in turn, would not take Gordon’s calls to her, nor return them. He called her at Thomas’s townhouse, where she had gone to stay after Thomas had paid her bail. They did not own an answering machine. Diane answered the phone, and as soon as she heard DiPippa’s voice, she hung up on him. Greta’s lawyer, Bert Baucom, also refused his calls, and then Baucom’s secretary also began to hang up on DiPippa the moment he spoke.

At night he rifled through Greta’s jewelry, pulled down all her dresses and searched their pockets, emptied her shoeboxes onto the closet floor, pulled from drawers

her shirts and slacks, her brassieres and whispery underpants. He piled it all on the bed. He sat down on top of the soft pile and peeled pictures from old photo albums he had never before opened. Page after page of photos. Her first wedding, at which she and Winstead looked as solemn as mourners. More pictures of Winstead, a stout, balding man with a long mustache, in one picture wearing a plumed helmet and a medal-studded sash, raising a sword into the air, surrounded by other like-costumed men; the handwritten caption in blue ink on the back read: *K. of C. Induction '73*. He dropped the photographs around him, the bed banked with her past full of strangers, a story as unfamiliar to him as a book written in another language. He opened another album, photos of Greta as a girl in Germany. He paused at one photo with a white scalloped margin, a frail blond-haired child maybe six years old standing on a rocky shore, bundled up in a plaid coat. Some body of water stretched away behind her, gray and opaque. In brown ink on the back was handwritten, *Fehmarn, 1944*. He stared at her happy face, unmarred but for a shadowy dimple in one cheek. He did not remember Greta having a dimple.

He slept on the floor beside the bed, and when after a few nights he had pulled apart every room, searched every space, and the fallout lay piled in a pyramid, inscrutable, and he was still anxious, still restless, he understood that he'd only find satisfaction in seeing her face and hearing her voice. His wife. His *true* wife. Not this gray ghost who for years had glumly haunted his couch, but this woman he had married and who had broken into strangers' houses and who had left him, all without his ever having known she existed.

He shaved and dressed. He combed his hair. He navigated his long driveway without seeing it, and he came out to the street, and then to the county road, and then he was on the interstate, and then the Beltway, on the inner loop toward Maryland. He did not register the traffic all around him. He thought of Thomas's townhouse, the spare room in the finished basement, the sliding glass door. He would break in if he had to—he thought of his crowbar in the trunk. He thought of Greta, the secret sound of her breathing as she slept alone on the pullout couch, dreaming her unknowable dreams.

## AFTER THE FUNERAL

Julie is twenty-eight, a social worker in D.C. One evening in March she is walking from the Metro to her Northeast condo, quickly because P Street between Seventh and Ninth is spooky with its shadowy, half-rehabbed row houses, when a gust fills the air with tiny snowflakes: cold dancing sparks that prickle her cheeks and ears and light in her eyelashes, and then are gone. She laughs, and her laugh bounces down the sidewalk like a little ball and disappears into the gloom. She turns in a circle: there is no one else on the street. She looks at the phone in her hand. Loneliness floods her, as black as anything she's ever felt.

She goes home and gets online and reactivates her dating profile. In the past she waited for men to approach her, but she has always attracted, exclusively, deeply fucked-up people. Before online dating she thought the magnetism was pheromonal, but now it seems that something in her face must beckon them, something visible in photographs, a shadow behind her eyes, some strain at the corners of her smile. This time she determines not to let the perverts and misogynists control the experience, and she browses profiles until she comes to a middle-school teacher named Phil. He's a secular humanist and a nonsmoker, five-nine, M.A. in history. In his photos he wears glasses and an argyle sweater—the presentation of these features is calculated to attract certain types, and she's aware of them working on her. But, he also doesn't drink; she sends him a message.

Her Myers-Briggs type is INTJ, which means she has a low tolerance for uncertainty, so she is relieved when, late that same night, just as she's falling asleep, his reply vibrates the phone in her hand. *I'm glad you messaged me*, he writes. *You seem wonderful. Educated and eclectic. And what a fascinating, not to mention noble, career.* She holds the phone close to her eyes and inspects his photos again. She whispers, So what's wrong with you, Phil? Her breath fogs out his face.

When he calls a few days later his voice is bracing, splashy with enthusiasm. He sounds younger than twenty-nine. He asks a flurry of questions, until she laughs as if he's physically touched the ticklish arch of her waist. He asks, When was the first time you fell in love? She says, How about we save some of that for later? She knows what she feels are the symptoms of dopamine flooding her brain—warmth spreading from the ache like a hole in her center, the acceleration of her pulse, and then some heady, uncanny sensation, which she can't quite pin down—and she recoils from it, as if she'd dipped her toe into too-hot water. But of course this, the biological response, is exactly the point; these symptoms *are* the experience of love. The species has selected for it. And if she can't just relax and enjoy, bodily, the euphoria his flattery and curiosity induce, then she might as well just hang up on him. Delete her profile again. Commit to spending her weekends curled up like a dried leaf in her bed, surrounded by casebooks and mystery novels.

She meets him for coffee. She insists on paying for her own. He's paler than in his photos. As they talk he shuffles his feet on the concrete floor—this puts her a little on edge. He fixates on her counseling work at the Center. Do you ever get scared? he asks.

Do you ever just panic? She cannot help contrasting him in her mind with Matthew, who only ever talked about himself, his own problems, which were legion, and who even as he held forth was always gazing away over her shoulder. But Phil, when Julie speaks, concentrates on her as though he is waiting for something very specific to come out of her mouth. A secret password, a magician's dove. When he kisses her good-night, his skin smells like freshly opened copier paper.

On their second date they go to dinner. She won't let him pay for her entrée, but she enjoys the evening well enough that she invites him back to her condo. He says, Your place is so *put together*, and she wonders if he thinks she's too uptight. As a lover his attention is almost medical. His tongue probes into her. At first the subjection unnerves her, but his diligence beguiles her, overcomes her. He sleeps over. She thinks she likes the weight of him in her bed, the generous heat he emanates, but all night her sleep is patchy and thin. In the morning when he is dressed and ready to leave, she is struck by the fact that he is her first lover in five years, and she hugs him for so long, he says, Hey—it's going to be all right. And then—and *then*—she starts crying, right there in her underwear. God damn it, she says.

It's all right, he says. Look. Look at me. She meets his eyes, his brow puckered like a stage actor's expression of intensity. He says, I'm not afraid of your feelings. What's in there has to come out. This makes her feel awkward enough that she can get herself under control.

Her older sister Kara calls to ask her to dog-sit for the weekend, and Julie is forced to admit she has a date. Kara's an extrovert; she approves, no matter who the man

is. She has in the past accused Julie of rejecting pleasure as a form of self-punishment. She and Joel share their two-bedroom house right now with five rescued dogs, and she once called Julie from Brazil, where she and Joel on vacation had overdrawn their checking account and needed Julie's credit card number to pay their way home. Her enthusiasm about Phil makes Julie cringe. But because the subject is already before them and Julie has no one else to confide in, she finds herself telling Kara everything.

I think he's an INFP, Julie says. I've never had good luck with P's.

And that's what? says Kara, who is herself a P. Introvert, she says, intuitive, feathers... Is it feathers or fur?

Introvert, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving, says Julie. Which, I appreciate an INFP's generosity of spirit, but I wonder if his comfort with open-endedness is going to make me crazy.

You sound fucking crazy right now, says Kara.

It's just terrifying, Julie says, to feel so invested already. After Matthew, I don't trust my emotional compass. I see this with patients all the time: someone makes the exact the wrong choice, and it's so obvious to everyone but them. I refuse to be that asshole. I already *was* that asshole, and I refuse to do it again.

Everyone is that asshole, says Kara. That's what love is—opening yourself up to that. How many years ago was Matthew? Stop trying to game the system and *enjoy* yourself, for thirty seconds.

Julie doesn't take advice well, and her sister is an especially dubious source. Five months after their wedding Kara learned that Joel was cheating with an old girlfriend, and



seven years later their marriage is like the Reconstruction South, full of complicated resentments and political jockeying. And yet, Julie thinks, there is a certain amount of wisdom in what Kara is saying.

She lets Phil buy her dinner. She tries to accept this as a gift instead of a prescribed socioromantic transaction. Because they're in Arlington, they go back to his apartment. He lives in a studio in one of those big subdivided Craftsman places: humped floors, cracks up the walls—she shared an apartment like this with Matthew, when they were grad students. All of Phil's light bulbs seem to be of a lower wattage than called for, and all night the ceiling creaks as his upstairs neighbor paces without rest. Phil seems reluctant to leave Julie alone even for a moment; when he shows her to the bathroom she finally has to shut the door, gently, in his face.

She has brought with her a blister-pack of clonazepam wafers that Dr. Baxter from the Center prescribed when she suffered a panic attack at work, months ago. She dislikes drugs, that they alter the predictability of her body's responses, but tonight it's important to her to seem less anxious, so after brushing her teeth she slips a wafer under her tongue. It dissolves sweetly. Phil's lovemaking is again weirdly punctilious, but she tries not to feel dissected, to accept this attention, also, as a gift. Afterward he puts his arm across her and pulls her back against him in the manner of a hostage-taker. He kisses the tender spot behind her earlobe. She shivers, not unpleasantly. She is no less aware of uncertainty lurking, always, behind everything, but the medicine has muffled the coarse drone of her worry. Phil whispers her name. She says, Yes? The ceiling makes a tired

swishing sound, as if the neighbor upstairs is dragging a broom in slow circles. Phil doesn't answer, and before she realizes it, she has unfolded into a brittle, blank sleep.

On Sunday she sends him a text: *I had a lovely time. See you again soon?* By the end of the day he hasn't responded.

The weather has taken a balmy turn. She goes for a walk and tries to enjoy the sinking sun's warmth on her face, but every few steps she checks her phone. When she comes back to her door she stands with her keys in hand, as if she has a choice other than to go inside. While she eats dinner she starts to type a text message, and then deletes it. She does the same thing again, and then once more. She doesn't want to seem insistent. She tries to think of something funny she might have read, which she can share with Phil. Finally she just writes, *Everything OK?* and sends it, and instantly, with her whole body, she begins to hate herself.

All around her, people have real problems. The courts and public clinics send these people to her office every day. Here on the other side of her desk sits Joseph: forty-three, black, a Metro conductor, slump-shouldered, days unshaven, by the smell of him a heavy smoker, his face a transcript of worry. Joseph is here because he loses his temper and physically abuses his two young sons, whom the courts have placed with their aunt.

All right, I'm abusive, he says. I don't care what we call it. I can't get control of my feelings. I never got so mad before Pattie died, but now I'm alone with those boys, and I work all day. I got no one to help me. I swear, I think I'm just God-damn *tired*. Can that be all it is?

Well first, I want to tell you, she says, that it's tremendously brave of you to face the problem like this, just head-on. Most people, out of fear, bury themselves in denial.

She works with abusers every day, all of them victims, themselves, of abuse. It used to frighten her how many are out there. Most of them would never use these words, *abusive*, *victim*, to describe themselves. Joseph is exactly the type of person she took up this work in order to help. And yet as she counsels him she is aware of herself coasting on platitudes, as she does when she's under stress, or hasn't eaten, or hasn't slept—running down the minutes before their session is over and she can check, again, the phone in her top drawer. She says, Tell me a little bit about your own upbringing.

It was fine. Some good, some bad.

Tell me about the good, she says.

Why don't you just ask about the bad? That's what you want to hear.

All right, she says. Tell me about the bad. She leans her elbows on the desktop and wonders, again, if she will feel the phone vibrating inside the drawer. It's been three days. Phil might be dead. Or his phone might be broken. Although surely he has access to e-mail—over and over she jostles between giving him the benefit of the doubt and refusing to make excuses for him. She has not talked to Kara, too embarrassed at having put herself in this spot, and also a little angry at Kara's encouragement, or at herself for having followed it.

Joseph stops talking and cocks his head. He sees that her mind is elsewhere. She feels her forehead flushing. She says, May I ask how long ago your wife died?

Two years, he says, his voice lower now, and in a show of nonchalance or impatience he lolls his head to the left and raises his eyes to her framed Rothko print.

It's hard, she says, to properly grieve when you've got two young boys relying on you to be strong.

I did my grieving. That's all in the past. That's not why I'm here.

Well, grief is a funny thing, she says. It runs on its own schedule, and we're not always aware of how it's acting on us. Unfortunately, it won't let us impose our own agenda on it. And in fact any kind of unresolved feelings can influence our behaviors, often without our even knowing what it is we're trying to work out.

He shuts his eyes. You're not listening, he says. He's right: relaying theory is poor practice. And she has no patience to tease from him his living illumination of these principles. She won't be of use to anyone until she gets herself some closure.

After work she drives out to Phil's house. Just as she pulls up, the heavy rain quits and she feels as though a concealing cloak has been yanked from her. She stops anyway. His car is parked out front, but his apartment windows are dark. She stares at his blinds as if to part them with her worry. A flash on the panes—a reflection—startles her, and she hurries on down the block, and when she comes to the stop sign she is dizzy with anxiety and shame.

This is crazy, she thinks. You're being crazy. Go home and forget him.

But when she gets home, even as she is coming through the door, the cell phone is in her hand and she's calling him. His voicemail answers and she hesitates—teeters on the edge of the silence. Then she begins. I really hope you're OK, she says. I'm sure you

are. (Surprised to feel the truth in this—realizing she hasn't for a second really believed he is dead, or comatose in some hospital.) And I don't know if maybe you realized you don't like me as much as you thought you did, or if you're just the type of person who now and then needs to go incommunicado—and if that's the case, that's fine, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. But it's unhealthy for *me*. (Crying now—God damn it.) It just pushes all the wrong buttons for me. It hits all my abandonment buttons. I can't—

Another call comes in. It's him. Her body flashes cold.

She answers. Hey, he says. Did you just call? His living voice opens a space of relief in her, and humiliation rushes to fill it.

Are you OK? she says, growing angry now.

Yeah, I'm... Yeah. Well, my uncle died.

Oh, she says, now abashed—she cannot get a footing on any one emotion. I'm sorry. Were you close to him? She's aware of how peculiarly formal and conversational, both, this question sounds.

Sort of. In a manner of speaking. It's been a lot of years, but yeah, I did use to be close to him.

Well, I'm sorry, she says. The anger edging back in.

I was going to call you.

Were you?

I mean, yes—but I meant like right now. Tonight. I was going to call you and ask you something. It's weird, actually. I feel like you were reading my mind to call just now.

I was just worried about you, she says, and now she is starting to cry again. She pulls her hair up at the scalp until it hurts. She feels like she's losing her mind.

I know, he says. I'm sorry. I should have—

What did you want to ask me? she says. She can't bear his pity.

Well, so, the funeral is this weekend. It's up in Pennsylvania, up in the mountains, and I have to go. I'm leaving Friday. It's going to be a little ... well. I need to be there. And I don't know, I know it's weird, but it would be nice if you could go up there with me. I mean it might be nice to have you there with me.

Again her reality is jarred; she didn't really believe this dead uncle was real. She says, Oh, and waits, as though Phil might say more. He doesn't, and she feels in his silence an echo of the earlier abandonment. She says, All right, as a way of drawing him back.

Oh, that's wonderful. God. That's great, Julie.

The sound of him saying her name solidifies her. She steps out of the wild morass of her feelings, and thinks: I'm a fucking mess. I'm a raving lunatic. I'm *lucky* to have met him. I'm lucky he likes me—that he wants me around at all. And if he never finds out how damaged I am, that will also be nothing but good luck.

Only after they hang up and she sinks into her bed's familiar depths does she begin to consider what she has committed to in Pennsylvania—what she will be diving headfirst into. The uncontrolled displays of grief, sloppy and sentimental, by strangers for a stranger. The ancient tensions and alliances between family members, uncomfortably perceptible to her but illegible. The mawkish theatre of religious ceremony. The drinking.

On the pillow beside her the ringing phone startles her. It's Phil again. And as she answers she knows why he's calling. He says, I listened to your voicemail.

I'm sorry, she says.

Did you mean all that? Do you think I'm unhealthy for you?

I mean, I did in the moment. But I didn't know where you were. I didn't know why I hadn't heard from you. She's aware of how needy this sounds. She says, I don't feel that way now.

This is important. The whole truth is important.

I know that, she says. I just had a bad day. Please just forget you heard any of that. Please just delete it.

In the morning, she meets with Gary. He is seventeen, baby-faced, a little overweight, sensitive, probably INFJ, although she's sometimes found it difficult to type people of differing races. He's been arrested four times. This time he was caught smashing out the windows of a stranger's car with a brick. This sort of ritual violent eruption is the acting out of a fight instinct the patient suppressed during an early trauma—for instance, an overbearing parent may not have allowed him to express justifiable anger. Or he maybe have been physically restrained while suffering sexual abuse. He stares at the hard carpet between her desk and his sneakers, abashed, as if she is calling him terrible names. She gets these kids who need nothing so much as a safe, loving embrace, and she wishes she could provide it. She can't. Touching is out of the question, and with good reason. She says, I know how it can be satisfying, sometimes, to destroy something. Especially something that belongs to someone else. I get how it could

make you feel better. In his heavy coat he is buttressed against her, and everyone else. She says, What did it feel like to smash that car? Do you remember? He will not meet her eyes. She says, Was it a sense of relief?

I don't know, he says—one sullen, slurred note: *Io*. But this isn't a shrug; it is a throat-clearing. He wants to talk to her but doesn't feel safe yet. She waits. She tries to make her face tender, but not pitying. She tries to make her silence say, Whatever terrible thing happened to you, Gary, whoever damaged you, they did not make you unlovable. You are precious and lovable. She can't tell him this out loud. He wouldn't believe her.

Phil drives them west into the Maryland mountains, and soon they have left the interstate for byways that nestle into shady hollows. The smell of his car's interior reminds her of children's cough syrup. They are both quiet, and she takes this to mean they are comfortable with one another. On the stereo he plays an old punk-rock CD, but so faintly it gives only a low wash of sound, as if it were Debussy. Now and then they pass, too quickly to read, roadside historical markers. Her thoughts drift out into the days ahead, and when she comes back she cannot tell whether the darkness that has risen around them is the darkness of the hills or of the night.

A text message comes in from Kara: *Where are you I just went by your place*. Another message, also from Kara, follows immediately, and Phil says, It's weird, you know, I've never driven up here myself, but I remember every turn. The last time I came up I was sixteen. My parents were in the middle of splitting up. I had to hitchhike.



It's beautiful up here, she says, and looks out left and right, although it's already too dark to see anything. I can imagine how it'd make a nice getaway.

He says, I always kind of daydreamed about bringing a girl up here. She doesn't know how to respond; she feels excluded, somehow, by this memory. He says, Are your parents still married? You never talk about them.

She considers how best to summarize. She's not in the mood to get into it all. She says, They're actually passed away. Both of them. They separated for a while when I was in college, but they never did get divorced.

Yes, he says, as if in agreement. He adjusts the heater. When he doesn't add anything more, she looks again at Kara's message. He says, You and that phone.

It's just my sister. She's kind of a flake.

She is aware of herself demeaning Kara as a way of preempting his jealousy. This is a bad habit; Matthew was jealous of anyone who borrowed her attention for even a moment. Feeling defiant now against the spirit of that past, she reads the message. It says only: *Are you with Phiilll??* She begins to type a response. Phil lurches into the left lane to get around a truck ahead of them, but an oncoming car forces him to abandon the pass. This happens twice more, and he curses. Finally, unable to concentrate, she puts the phone away in her purse. When she tells him she will soon have to use the bathroom, he doesn't answer. His face is strange in the light of the instrument panel. After a while she says, I'm going to have to pee pretty soon.

I heard you, he says.

He stops at a gas station made to look like a log cabin. He says he will wait for her, and jerks the parking brake. Anxiety, spiderlike, patters up her arms. Surely he's not upset about the texts. Inside the gas station all the shelved goods are covered with a paste of dust, and in the restroom stall the fishy smell of dried urine is overwhelming. Julie holds her breath. She takes out her phone. She has no signal. She breathes through the sleeve of her sweater. In her purse she has packed plenty of clonazepam, but she is hesitant to blunt her alertness.

She types a message to Kara: *Yeah with Phil. Went to PA. I'm OK but call me when you get this.* She sends it with the hope that, should she cross again into a field of reception, the message will make it out to Kara, and if nothing else someone in the world will know who she is with.

In the car, Phil doesn't speak to her. He reverses, twisting himself to look out the rear window. The stereo is silent now. The road coils into the shadows. The headlights are washy on the rows of trees parting in front of them and finally she says, Are you mad at me for something?

What? He sounds surprised. No, why? And then he seems to concede: I just wanted to get there before it gets too late.

They arrive at the Mountain Vista, a quaint but well-preserved roadside inn. The sign looks like a 1950s postcard, and shines down on them through the windshield. Now cheerful, Phil says, Well we made it, and leans over to kiss her, and the relief of his affection nearly brings her to tears. She puts her hands on his hot, prickly cheeks and kisses him back.

In the bathroom she changes into pajamas. She checks her phone: still no signal, but she is less concerned about that. She stares at the mirror and sees the perils that face her. She will have to learn how to read his nonverbal cues, to not see his every brusque gesture as a sign of ebbing warmth. She feels as if many heavy books are stacked in her chest. When she comes out, he's beneath the covers. The room smells musty; the hotel is not as well maintained inside as out. She lifts the starched sheet to slip in beside him and sees that he's naked. She lies down on her back. He clicks the TV off and turns on his side to face her. He says, I'm sorry if I've been distant. The trip was a little more intense for me than I thought it would be.

Well, talk to me about it. Intense how?

He touches her face. He says, I feel like I've always known you. I feel like there's nothing you could tell me that I don't already know somewhere inside me.

We're both intuitives, she says. Intuitives tend to just *know* things. But he's right; she hadn't thought about it, but she does sense an unaccountable familiarity between them. It must be, she thinks, a trick of the dopamine.

He licks his lips. Tell me now, he says, about the first person you loved.

Oh, she says. That. She stares into the shadows beyond the bed. She can barely make out the edges of the dresser, the little table by the window. First, she says, you have to understand that social-work grad programs are like leper colonies, except each leper believes he's Jesus and can heal all the others. So you can imagine what the dating is like. He doesn't laugh; his gaze is serious, as though he is trying to levitate her. She tells him how Matthew cheated on her with two different women, and how she then moved in with

him anyway. I thought I could help him, she says. But he was a sex addict and a sociopath and just way beyond my training. I was naïve. He was my first everything. I don't know. I just wanted someone to love me. After that, though, I kind of gave up on the whole enterprise.

Phil says, I could love you.

She begins to cry. Oh *God*, she says. What is going on with me? She turns away and hides her face, but he pulls her again onto her back. He tugs the pillow away. She groans in frustration. I swear to God, she says, *I never cry*.

It's all right.

It's ridiculous, she says. I feel like a crazy person lately.

It's good. He kisses her neck. Don't stop. Give it all to me. His hand on her hip spreads deep waves inside her, estradiol, testosterone, and she lets herself sink into them.

After orgasm, oxytocin floods the brain, fostering a sense of harmony and bonding between partners. It's been five years since Julie has felt it, and it's beautiful, a warm halo that envelops she and Phil both. She lies with her head on his chest. Her anxiety is not only muted, but absent, leaving her mind and body with the placid stillness of a house under a power outage. She understands now why people endure many things. She whispers, How are you feeling about tomorrow? Are you nervous? Sad?

Beside her ear, his heart works wearily in its little private room. He says, To be honest, part of me is looking forward to it. This claim surprises her a little. He says, My uncle's house is on Lake Cowan. I used to spend my summers there. My parents would just ditch me for weeks at a time, and I hated being there. I hated my uncle. But whenever

things got bad, I'd take the rowboat out to the middle of the lake and just sit there by myself. That experience became, I don't know. A center for me. A sanctuary.

How did things get bad? she says.

I always imagined, he says, that some day I'd take a girl out there with me. We'd row out to the middle and just pour our hearts out to each other. I've kind of carried that daydream around with me for years. He grins at her. It's a little embarrassing to admit that out loud.

Already the refrigerator buzz of her anxiety rises again. She kisses him, hoping to tamp it back down.

He says, Will you go out there with me? After the funeral?

Yes, she says.

That night she dreams of her father putting his fingers into her mouth, and she wakes at three and shuts herself in the bathroom. She kneels and stares into the white pit of the toilet, refusing the nausea as though it were someone trying to push open a door. Eventually, it passes. When she comes back into the room she can't see anything. She lies down and listens to Phil's breathing until his face emerges in the gray glow of morning, peaceful beside her.

When they leave the motel, the sky is clear. She always imagines the Appalachians to be a shrunken range, blunted by the millennia, but looming in the daylight they are impressive, ragged and undeniable. Phil drives past ancient barns and

whitewashed houses. Plows crawl up the steep fields. He says, My father called me yesterday, before we left. He's not coming.

That's too bad, she says, although the existence of Phil's father, a real person, seems somehow unlikely.

I told him he'd regret it.

You just never know, she says, what kind of pain people are carrying around in their hearts. She was so foggy and tired when she dressed, she was afraid a dose of clonazepam would knock her out entirely. Now, after a cup of hard motel coffee, her vibrating fingers pinch the blister pack in her purse. She does not want Phil to see her take any medicine. She slides her thumb across the smooth face of her phone, and wonders about Kara, who either never received her message or just never got around to calling. You can't tell with Kara; she's maddening.

He says, I guess he's got his reasons.

They pull into the parking lot of a quaint clapboard church, like the wedding chapel in a sappy movie. He holds the door for her; she enters ahead of him. At the altar lies the silver casket, and in the casket, exposed from the chest up, rests the body. The sight of it jars her—she did not, for some reason, expect to see the corpse. Nose and chin and gaunt rouged cheeks, the eyelids decisively shut. It chills her. Its uncanny stillness. Its total lack of volition like a dead spot in time and space. Phil leaves her in the rearmost pew and goes to kneel at the casket. A handful of people murmur in the front, ignoring him. She takes the medicine from her purse and with some effort tears the foil blister and gets the wafer into her mouth before he returns to her. Haggard, sweating, he sits and

takes her hand. She squeezes his cold fingers. Hollow-voiced, he says, I don't know about this.

Do you need to leave? Her voice sounds strange to her. Already the cottony insulation of the medicine has risen around her.

No, he says. I need to be here.

The service is low-pitched, almost stoic. The minister leads with an even tone, admirably dispassionate. Phil's hand warms in hers. She allows her thoughts to drift to her mother's Episcopalian funeral, three years ago. It was long and mawkish, a binge of grief—her mother's family always so dramatic. Three years earlier, Julie had refused to go to her father's funeral, and her mother had said, You think you're the only one who's suffered? but Kara convinced her to let Julie stay home. For hours she sat on her childhood bed in the empty house, staring at that one spot on the yellow wall, wondering: Is it over?

Her back is sticky with sweat. She looks at Phil, the knot of his jaw. She notices a tiny perforation in his earlobe: an old piercing. It's strange. Not that he once wore an earring, but that she's never before seen the hole.

The organist closes with a somber hymn called "Over the Chaos." They meet the other mourners outside. She stands apart, to give Phil the space and time to find his level of comfort with these people. The hugs and handshakes are tentative, as though they are all unsure of the proper gestures. Insects chatter in the grass and the afternoon humidity drapes over her shoulders. Phil just stands there toeing the grass, so she comes forward and slips her arm through his. The gazes of his relatives light on her and then flick away.

In the car he blasts the heat to de-fog the windows, and she realizes she has never seen him wear the glasses in his profile photo. They follow the short funeral train to the cemetery, a small meadow cut out of the woods. The grass is overgrown and many of the headstones are worn down to blank nubs. As she is about to step out of the car, he says, My cousins aren't happy to see me. He bites off the corner of a thumbnail and spits it out the side of his mouth.

Why do you say that?

I don't know, he says. Through the windshield he watches the listless mourners gather beneath the awning. It all made sense in my mind, bringing you here. He looks at her, and his face softens. I'm sorry. He laughs. This is all a lot stranger than I thought.

She says, Grief does funny things to people. The Buddhists suggest that you just let it wash over you, like a big wave, without resisting it or chasing it. She feels ridiculous telling him this. The clonazepam's calm haze has already begun to thin.

He says, Do the Buddhists ever follow their own advice? Does anyone?

Maybe we should go back to the room. We could order a pizza.

Not yet, he says.

They watch the service from the car. He takes her hand, but they don't speak. She wants nothing more than to lie down, even if only on the thin motel mattress, and she feels guilty for this. After the others have gone ahead, he winds the car down a steep one-lane road. She lays her head against the cold window. Soon through rows of sickly looking pines the water is visible, an emptiness reflecting the dark hills that tilt away from it. They park in the driveway of an A-frame house. Here there's a clear view: the



lake is round as the face of a clock. He stands beside the car, looking down at the water, his hands in his hair.

Inside, the house is mostly dark and smells of a long history of smokers. No one greets them. They go straight to the dining room, where a few casseroles are arrayed, their surfaces unbroken, spoons laid beside them. Julie is nearly faint with hunger, but she does not touch them. She waits for Phil to make a move, but he only listens to the rise and fall of conversation in the kitchen, as if waiting to hear something specific. One of the cousins comes in, a man a bit older than them, mustached, his face red and pitted, his paw-like hand holding a tumbler of liquor at such a tilt that it trickles a drop over the lip. He leans on the jamb. Phil says, Where did this awful table come from?

Matter of fact, I bought that, he says. How you been, Phil?

I'm fine. You?

The cousin gives a little laugh and looks at Julie. With his lined, leathery face and eyes like empty fishbowls, he reminds her of Joseph from the Center. He says, You want to come sit?

Phil drifts nearer and takes her hand. Just for a minute, he says.

In the kitchen six more cousins, women and men, occupy chairs along the walls, as if waiting for a performance in the center. Whenever Julie joins a group of strangers without knowing what to expect of them, a protective fog rises inside her, and in addition to her hunger and exhaustion, and the dwindling medication, and the cigarette smoke that hangs as thick as a cold front, this mild dissociation makes the whole scene feel like a claustrophobic dream. And yet she's aware of a peculiar emptiness here. No children—

she hears them nowhere in the house. How strange, for a family to gather without any of their children. Every one of the cousins holds wine or beer or something harder: the tang of alcohol is bright amid the smoke. The cousins talk about old neighbors and local business owners. They are all cynical, overweight. They laugh mirthlessly. She has not been around drunken people for a long time, at least not in an environment she does not control, and her skin crawls. A coppery taste creeps into her mouth, and like a smear of bile she swallows the memory of last night's dream. Even in the Center, where her authority is like an armor and the security button on her desk phone is always within reach, when her patients arrive drunk it makes her anxious. It was a drunk, abusive patient named Roan that triggered her panic attack those months ago. To anchor herself now, she begins to type the cousins in her mind: ISFJ, ESFP, ISTP—all sensors, she thinks, not an intuitive among them. She and Phil might as well come from a different planet. Then, like an old hand-cranked phonograph running out its torque, the conversation dies and everyone stares into the empty space. She senses something familiar in this silence. Her internship during grad school required her to make home visits, and inside every trailer, every apartment, every filthy house, the air was stamped with the memory of some trauma. The space itself seemed to wince. Every time she knocked and the front door opened, her panic response flared inside her.

Phil seems to share the flight impulse; he says, I think we're gonna go get some air.

You going out in that boat? says one of the cousins. I'd be careful in that thing. She ain't as sound as she was.

We really just need some air, says Phil. We're not smokers.

'Course you're not.

Julie follows him through the kitchen door to the patio. The air outside is merciful, cool and clear. She stands there, clearing her lungs and sinuses, letting the near-panic expire sourly in her belly. The patio furniture is covered with a tarp. The sun has sunk already behind the mountains, but the sky and the lake are a milky blue. She follows Phil down a path soft with pine straw. At the bottom, the dock wobbles out into the water. The dented rowboat bobs against it. The sight of it compounds her exhaustion. This has been rough on you, she says. Let's go back to the motel. I'll drive.

He steps out onto the warped planks. Not yet, he says. He sets a foot into the boat and Julie flinches, expecting it to slide away from him, to rock and unbalance him. But his legs understand the space and the movement. She says, I don't know if it'll hold both of us.

It'll hold us, he says. You told me you'd come.

I'm starving. I hate to be selfish, but I'm—

This is why we came here. He sits down in the boat, facing stern. This is why I brought you here.

We can go out for a minute, she says, but then we go back. OK?

Then we go back.

When she steps in, the boat pitches beneath her as she'd expected it to do for him, and she nearly tumbles into the water. She lowers herself onto the wooden thwart, purse in her lap. They are face to face; her shins brush his, and she tries to find her own space

for them. He untethers the boat and takes the oars in his hands. He looks at her. I'm glad you came, he says, and the boat lurches from the rocky shore. Over her shoulder she is almost relieved to see the house shrinking into the darkness. The water smells fishy, and like gasoline, and then there is another smell to it, something familiar to her, earthy and old, which she cannot name. The oarlocks squeak. The oars part the water with deep swallowing sounds and trickle coldly when he lifts them.

They resent me, he says. Did you see it?

I don't know, she says. Why would they resent you?

My cousin Charles—the one you met? Once my uncle got drunk and chased him out of the house with a shotgun.

Oh my God.

Phil laughs. They didn't like me being around. I made them uncomfortable.

Hang on, says Julie.

But he never touched any of them, says Phil. Not one hair. Not while I was around. They owe me for that. I was his only concern.

Wait. What are you telling me? Her hands begin to shake in her lap.

We're here.

They have come to the center of the lake. The light has escaped the sky and the surface of the water, and the darkness is all around them. She looks back at the tiny glowing pyramid of the house, farther away than they could possibly have rowed. The last gauzy scraps of the clonazepam have left her, and already in her veins streaks the

bright trickle: cortisol, epinephrine. Through her skirt and pantyhose the splintery thwart bites at her legs. Her feet throb in her hard shoes.

Look straight up, he says. She does: many stars burn up there already. He says, that starlight you're looking at happened a trillion years ago.

I know that, she says.

Look how bright it is.

She sees it but does not see it.

I used to sleep out here, he says. The water jangles glasslike against the hull. Keep looking, he says. An oarlock whimpers as he pulls on one side, and the boat pivots and the stars pinwheel.

Let's go back, she says. He stops them spinning. Something is coming, she senses too late.

You first, he says.

What?

Tell me what happened to you. Not Matthew. Somebody else. Something when you were a kid.

She thinks of her own bed. Her little office. What do you mean? she says. The taste of fingers in her mouth. Cortisol, epinephrine. She tries to see his face in the darkness and all she makes out is the glitter of his naked eyes. He spins the boat again. Stop it, she says.

I feel it. You think you're hiding it but you're not.

Her shoulders begin to tremble. You're not listening to me. I don't know what you're talking about.

I am listening, he says. This is why we came out here. All day long you are the listener. You listen to everyone else, their stories, their problems. Now I want to listen to you.

This has nothing to do with me, she says.

You're here. Why did you come here?

Here into the lake?

Here to the lake, here to the funeral. Here with me at this particular moment in your life.

I don't understand this conversation. Please. I want to go back.

It's time for you to deal with this.

Right this moment, she says.

We've gone back as far as we can go.

And now something amazing happens. In her lap, in her little purse, her phone begins to vibrate. And now comes the ring-tone she has set for Kara, a sound like birds singing—it echoes across the lake. She reaches into her purse and the phone falls into her hand and its tranquil, harmonious vibration spreads up her arm. She takes the phone out and like a candle it illuminates the tight space between them: his sagging red necktie, his sparkling eyes set deep in their recesses, the flat line of his mouth—the calmness of his face sends a white flash of fear across her and she answers the call and presses the cool phone to her ear, and she does not see him coming. He snatches the phone from her hand

and flings it away. It skids spattering across the top of the water, and then sinks straight down, its pale light lost.

God damn it, he says. I'm sorry. Just—we're here. I brought you all this way.

She stares at the spot in the darkness where the phone disappeared. Her hand tingles with the memory of the vibration.

All I ask, he says, is that you come out here and just fucking *talk* to me.

His hand touches her hand and she is now only her stress response—epinephrine, cortisol, uncoiling in her like a litter of snakes, electric. The taste of copper, of fingers, the wiggling of fingers into her, the fetor of alcohol, the monstrous weight.

Only there is no weight.

Her arms are free—and so she grabs for the oars, her body choosing its own action, testing the range of its freedom. He yanks the oars away and she leans forward, grabs for them again. With a little shout he lifts them and throws them out, one and then the other, and with stiff slapping splashes they disappear onto the dark water.

God fucking damn it, just *stop* it. You're *ruining* this.

She listens to the silence of the oars sliding away.

I'm sorry, he says. Do you know how long I've been waiting for you to come out here with me?

She says nothing.

I'm sorry, he says. Are you going to cry?

She laughs—a stone loosed from her throat. No, she says.

You can, he says. I want you to.

His hand again on her. It is not over; she begins to lift away from herself. But she is more afraid to leave herself here, and she grips herself like a rein. Everything is dark. The hard thwart beneath her, the dizzy world rocking beneath her. His hand slides to her knee, his hand hot, and his hot touch looses something inside her—she is sprung like a mousetrap—and she is on her feet, and the world lurches one way, and then the other.

Whoah—sit down.

He grabs at her wrist. She yanks away. Stop it, he says, sit still, and he grabs for her ankle. She kick him away and her shoe falls from her heel and hangs like a dead appendage, but his fingers keep coming, tangling her ankles, a confusion of brambles, until finally she bends her knees and jumps away.

For an instant she is in neither boat nor water. She hangs: in the calm, dead space between the leaping out and the splashing in.

And then into the black water she plunges and in one gulp is swallowed. Her skirt around her kicking legs swirls the impossible emptiness below. The lake is cold and all around her and then her head breaks the surface and she spits from her mouth the fibrous slime of lake water and hair. Her shoes gone, her blouse a coarse lather around her ribs and shoulders. He is hollering at her from somewhere above the splashing of her hands and her own sharp panting that sprays the water back into her face. The metallic taste of it. She hangs at the center of the emptiness. It is bottomless below her.

Is it over?

Julie, he says, his voice as close and quiet as if he is lying right behind her. Don't move. I hear you.